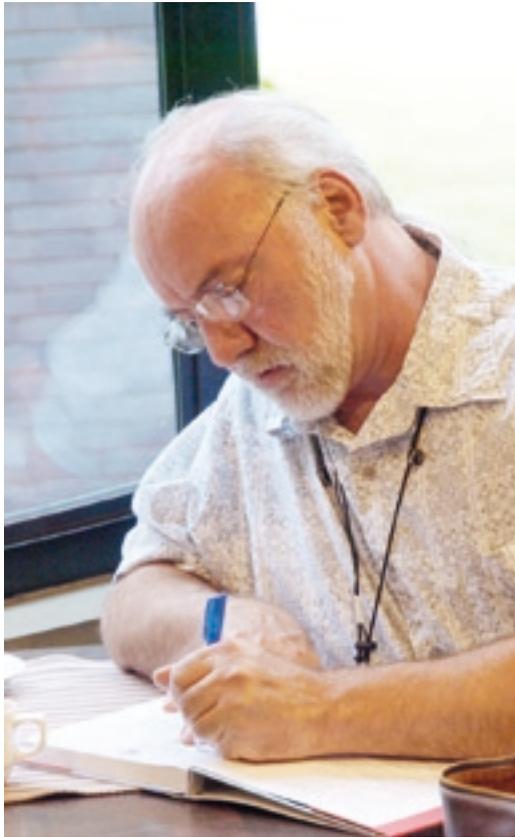


The art of sound

It's all about business and perception. **DENNIS BAXTER** encourages us to pick up our brushes.



I had a few extra hours in Chicago and found myself standing in front of George Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (1884-86) at the Art Institute. As usual, I'm paying as much attention to the sound around me as I am to the painting in front of me. A woman in a leopard skin jacket and gold shoes says 'This painting just looks like a bunch of coloured dots when you stand close to it, but when you walk away, the dots blur into something you understand.' The man by her side, a reflective smile on his face, said, 'Yeah, kinda like life, isn't it?'

Notably, Seurat is one of the most famous examples of the artist-as-scientist. A French painter who pioneered the neo-impressionist movement of the late 19th century, Seurat used complex, scientifically based lines and geometry that gave his works order and unity. He created huge compositions with tiny, detached strokes of pure colour too small to be distinguished when looking at the entire work, but making his paintings shimmer with brilliance.

And so, you ask, what does this art history have to do with broadcast sound? Art is subjective. In fact, when Seurat's work was first shown, critics ridiculed it. It was a totally new interpretation of reality. Sound is subjective, too. New technology, new techniques and new practices give rise to new audio interpretations of reality. Some people like it, some don't. There are a couple of factors that I believe influence why that is true.

First there's the business factor. Let's face it: broadcasting is financed by advertisers and everyone is crying the money blues. Budgets are under scrutiny, and as a result, mediocrity is the new normal. Mediocre programming with mediocre quality is rapidly becoming an international problem. Not long ago, a retired sound engineer wrote that he could influence production

without fear of reprisal. Well, I hope he did! And I hope I do.

Yesterday's broadcast world was much more focused, much less fragmented. A handful of deep-pocketed networks controlled production and paid their fulltime broadcast teams to produce assembly line shows. Today, there are hundreds of broadcast channels, tens of thousands of hours of programming, and nearly as many independent broadcast engineers. These professionals live the nomadic life of gig-to-gig ... going wherever the work is. And this makes the challenge of producing quality audio for broadcast even more difficult — especially walking that thin line between the budget-conscious producer and the innovative sound guy.

Then there's the perception factor. It's a broadcast village — flip through your cable channels and you can see programming from around the world without leaving the room. But we're not a homogenous society. We have unique expectations and perceptions of sound that are both cultural and personal.

I have studied sports production around the world and there is a significant range in the production interpretation of the image and soundtrack. Producers and viewers alike will interpret the quality of the programming relative to their own perceptions and cultures.

Our acoustic influences are geographical, cultural and generational. The psychological and physiological interpretation of a person's sound experiences forms a cultural base of relevance in life. Take music for example — think Latin tempo, European waltzes, African rhythm, American loud. Listener expectations are grounded in their experiences from birth.

Generationally, there are differences in audience perceptions. A generation that only experienced black and white TV with mono sound is far less critical of the sound than Mr Home Theatre. Fortunately, TV with mono audio has been replaced with hi-def and surround sound and audiences enjoy the experience.

Technologically, the Internet and video gaming influences are even more direct. The younger generation has grown up with SFX animation and virtual reality gaming in their daily life. Think about it: digital sound starts with the alarm clock and narrates your day through your car, phone, iPod and computer.

So, what does this subjectivity of sound mean for the broadcaster, producer, and audio engineer? It can be a unique factor in production. As visual content continues to incorporate reality and SFX (notice your TV screen and your computer screen — they do start to look alike), sound becomes as important as the visual — and, quite possibly, the difference. Play David Beckham's football video game and take a listen if you don't believe me.

The reality of today's productions — regardless of medium — mean that broadcasters, game designers, web producers and advertisers are all competing for consumers. Creating compelling content includes the visceral experience of sound and the creative producer understands this.

So here is the challenge: given the factors I've mentioned, how can you create your own unique sound solution and pioneer the future? Perhaps there is a cue to be taken from the artistic genius of Seurat — reinterpret reality with a new brushstroke, colour and tone and practice the art of sound. ■