

## The Multiplicity of Noise

The use of noise in sound art is largely a product of the development of audio recording technology. Sound recording removed the composition of sounds from the hands of writers (literally, as scores had to be written on paper) and passed it on to engineers. This doesn't mean that the preexisting system of intervals and notation was obsolete, but rather that it had now become a partner in a wider world of sonic possibilities. At the time, there were no means for notating these new sounds. Indeed, there were no pre-conceptions at all. The whole thing was new.

Today we have more than a century of the use of noise in sound art. The ways in which non-harmonic "noises" have been applied are numerous. The ubiquity of sound recording and playback technology has made the use of non-tonal sounds commonplace in audio composition. As the technology of audio recording and manipulation progressed, so did the complexity and differentiation of the conception of noise. Because of this, noise cannot be confined to a single definition. Indeed, defining it at all is very difficult. To begin to understand noise is to realize that it is a multiplicity, a social construct that is both personal and cultural.

Noise is, in essence, a negation. As Simon Reynolds puts it:

"The problem is that, to speak of noise, to give it attributes, to claim things for it, is immediately to shackle it with meaning again, to make it a part of culture. If noise is where

language ceases, then to describe it is to imprison it again with adjectives. To confer the status of value upon excess and extremism is to bring these things back within the pale of decency. So the rhetoricians of noise actually destroy the power they strive to celebrate; they are the very start of the process by which subversion is turned into contribution”(p.56).

To give too much attention to noise turns it into signal. Doing this is an essential part of what it means to be human. As humans we look for patterns. We seek order within the chaos of noise. In many ways noise is what we see before the pattern emerges. It is the absence that is destroyed by presence. Noise is a moment of surprise. Noise is everything and nothing. It is simplicity through overwhelming complexity. Noise is all this and more.

The use of noise, then, is a form of alchemy, the conversion of subversion to contribution. It is a form of assimilation and combination that produces a new entity. In the case of sound, the artist works as an acoustic alchemist, turning noise into signal through the direction of attention and the manipulation of sonorous objects.

#### Noise as Raw Material: *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer*

Pierre Schaeffer's *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* is widely regarded as the first piece of musique concrete music. Composed by Schaeffer in 1948, the piece begins with the sound of a whistle followed by a succession of rhythmic train noises. The sounds follow each other, much like the cars of a train, in a linear sequence of sound events. This contrasts strongly with the layering of sounds that would become a staple of musique con-

crete composition in the future. As such, the piece is easily discernible to the modern ear as a string of separate sonorous objects. The repetitive, machinic nature of the sounds themselves, coupled with the unmistakable quality of the recording technology available in the 1940s, give *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* an historical sound in much the same way that a grainy black and white photograph conjures up an impression of the past. Even though there are moments in which (after repeated listening) sounds can be heard to be sped up or slowed down, the sounds used by Schaeffer sound raw and uneffected. To the modern ear, accustomed to a constant technologically-facilitated assault of sounds, *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* sounds simplistic. Still, this relatively simple piece opened the door to a new world for future generations of sound artists.

The use of noise in *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* is ground-breaking. Pierre Schaeffer uses the sounds of trains as a raw material for his composition, and in doing so he embarks on a process of “[d]eliberately forgetting every reference to instrumental causes or preexisting musical significations”(Schaeffer p.81). Schaeffer hopes to encourage us to “seek to devote ourselves entirely and exclusively to *listening*, to discover the instinctive paths that lead from the purely ‘sonorous’ to the purely ‘musical’.”(Schaeffer p.81) This new conception of noise is brought about through what Schaeffer calls “acousmatics”. He hopes that, through a dissolution of the relationships between sounds and their meanings, we will learn to appreciate and evaluate sound on its own terms. “Such is the suggestion of acousmatics: to deny the instrument and cultural conditioning, *to put in front of us the sonorous and its musical possibility*.”(Schaeffer p.81) Acousmatics, then, is a way to manipulate noise. Schaeffer’s conception of acousmatics is a process by which the noise of the world is converted to signal through the conscious attention of the

composer (and the listener) in order to facilitate the use of noise within a composition. In this way Pierre Schaeffer pioneered the use of noise as a raw material from which sound compositions can be created

#### Noise as Silence: 4 33"

4 33" is John Cage's (in)famous "silent" composition. The piece begins with the pianist sitting at the piano with a stopwatch. The performer then measures the duration of each of the three movements of the piece with the stopwatch while opening and closing the piano lid to signify the beginning and end of each movement. As Mark Slouka notes, "4 33" rightly strikes us as hackneyed and worn, a postmodern cliché intent on blurring a line (between art and non-art, order and disorder, formal structure and random influence) that has long since been erased."(p.44) It may be a cliché, but even so 4 33" marks a turning point in modern conceptual composition. Cage's refusal to give in to expectations still causes outrage amongst audiences, as a quick viewing of comments posted to YouTube videos of 4 33" performances confirms.

But silence, or a lack of "music" is not the point of 4 33". In fact, silence is an illusion, an idealized state of nothingness that can only exist (for a hearing person) theoretically within a state of non-hearing. As Cage himself puts it, "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating."(p.25) This fascinated listening is the real purpose of 4 33". Cage uses the focused listening environment of the high-art performance space as a means to highlight the sounds of life. In this way, Cage's piece is a stark example of the composer as an alchemist. He uses his control of the audience's attention to effect a change upon

the atmospheric sounds of the performance space. "In the end, what is important about 4 33", of course, is that it is not a silent piece at all, but a piece in which accidental sounds inherent in the environment of the performance situation are allowed to be themselves and to be reflected on by the audience." (Duckworth p.16) In doing so, Cage brings noise out from the shadows and forces the audience to bestow attention upon the environmental sounds that surround us continuously. Signal is stripped away, leaving only the faint whispers of noise that underlie our entire lives. As the piece progresses, the audience slowly turns the small, quiet sounds of breath, air conditioning, and shuffling feet into an orchestral arrangement of minor sonic events. 4 33" is an important noise composition because of the way it illustrates that noise does not have to always be a loud and cacophonous experience. Sometimes noise is quiet and persistent, existing below the surface of attention.

#### Noise as Ambience: *Discreet Music*

*Discreet Music* begins with silence. Synthesized tones slowly fade up during the first 30 seconds of the piece. The soft tones have a floating, mellow quality, developing slowly over the course of its thirty-one minute run time. The use of reverberation gives the piece an ethereal hauntedness that slowly shifts over time as the synthesized patterns repeat against each other. The piece itself goes nowhere, and purposefully so. In headphones *Discreet Music* suggests that the listener give himself or herself over to the sounds, to allow the listener to float off into the ethereal space of the piece - and in doing so to relax and let go. This, as it turns out, is exactly what Brian Eno wanted the piece to convey. As Eno puts it, "immersion was really the point: we were making music

to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside."(p.95) To the casual listener, Discreet Music provides an experiential anchor, a place of respite in a turbulent world. The sounds are soothingly "just there". They demand nothing. You can pay attention or not - as you wish.

*Discreet Music*, then, works as a form of soothing background noise in which the listener allows the music to oscillate through the space between signal and noise. As Luigi Russolo realized, "Every manifestation of life is accompanied by noise."(p.13) Eno, then, creates sounds to make conscious use of this fact. He creates works designed to accompany and enrich the experience of life. In this way, Eno's work is a collaborative effort between not only himself and the technological mechanisms he uses to create his music, but also a collaboration between his work and the environments in which they are manifest. Through this relationship the music itself becomes a form of noise, infused into the background of human activity. Just as John Cage turned noise into signal through the direction of attention, Brian Eno turns music into noise through the way he creates works that allow for a loss of attention.

#### Noise as Unintelligibility: *Litany IV*

John Zorn's *Litany IV* is a solo voice piece composed for vocalist Mike Patton. It is part of a series of works by Zorn in which Patton participates as the voice of preverbal language. The piece begins with rhythm. Patton's voice rears back and offers a sharp staccato attack made from short pulses of vocalization, punctuated by screams. As the piece continues, the sounds traverse through stages of grunting, panting animality and coughing, vomitous sickness. Towards the middle of the piece the sounds become hu-

man again as Patton launches into high falsetto tones. The sounds of humanness are then taken over once again by animalistic grunts and growls that cohere into bits of rhythm. The sound of wind alternates with sounds of sickness and screams. As the piece nears the end, guttural breathe, panting, wheezing, grunting, and growling are heard. Rhythm emerges punctuated by growls, erupting into a vocal cacophony that peaks in a series of blood-curtailing screams (and a spit). The emotion of the screams turns to laughter, then crying. The sharp, rhythmic vocal attacks that characterize the beginning of the piece return as *Litany IV* concludes with a final piercing scream.

As a noise composition, *Litany IV* echoes the words of Simon Reynolds when he writes, “If music is a language, communicating moods and feelings, then noise is like an eruption within the material out of which language is shaped.”(p.57) John Zorn uses Mike Patton’s voice in exactly this way. The noises that come from Patton convey pre-logical associations and raw emotionality. The non-verbal vocalizations of Patton quite literally make use of the “material out of which language is shaped”. The breakdown of language becomes the source of a new form of direct emotional communication that uses the noises of the human animal to invoke feeling and expression. In doing so Zorn and Patton draw attention to noise as a means of expression and illuminate the way that non-verbal utterances communicate beyond the direct translational relationship of spoken language.

#### Noise as Overload: *Degradation of Tapes*

A harsh, quick burst of noise punctuates the beginning of Merzbow’s *Degradation of Tapes* before launching into a cacophony of screeching static. At first listen, it seems

that subtlety would be an unlikely descriptor of Merzbow's work, but attentive listening shows the amazing way that he creates shades of white noise. It is as if the sounds are carved out of static, causing the listener to focus on the absences within the wall of tonality that confronts him or her. The sound is an assault. It is total and annihilating, an unstoppable sheet of noise covering the listener entirely. The sound is grainy and flowing, the sonic equivalent of a turbulent ocean of sand, chaotic and powerful. As *Degradation of Tapes* continues I begin to acclimate to the barrage of sound and the experience of listening turns from an assault into a thick blanket. The sounds become meditative and peaceful. It is substantial. It holds me up as I float on and into it. I begin to hear sounds buried beneath the noise. Screams and sirens and machinery. The effect is the sonic equivalent of the way that we see images in a screen of white noise or shapes in passing clouds. (Is this schizophrenia?) My mind reaches out and collaborates with Merzbow, perceiving infinite possibilities buried in the blizzard of sonic matter that swirls over and through me. The weight of the noise fatigues my ears. As it nears completion, the tonality slides into lower and lower frequencies. Then, suddenly, it ends. Remarkably, the transition to silence after listening to *Degradation of Tapes* feels oppressive and violent. The blanket of sound is ripped away and I experience a sense of loss and quiet contemplation.

Merzbow's work is challenging. As Merzbow himself puts it:

"In the early days, the reaction was nothing. People thought that the music was just too difficult and loud. Recently, more people know how to comprehend my music. Many

people have said they could get into a trance from the music. This is a better way of understanding Merzbow”(Akita p.61)

Because of this, *Degradation of Tapes* can be read as a way of using an overload of noise as a compositional element in order to induce a desired effect. The listener’s ability to make sense of the cacophony is strained to the breaking point and the mind finally gives up trying to find order within the chaos. This leads to a trance-like state of acceptance. The noise is allowed to exist on its own terms, and as such it becomes meditative and calming - a single sonorous monolith.

### Conclusion

In his book *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture* Timothy D. Taylor writes, “It is not that the mainstream offers no avenue to understand people and their music in a particular place and time. But the odd - the marginal - can often tell us more, for the margins often have much to say about the centers that those in the centers might not be aware of.”(p.9) This idea can be seen throughout the history of music. Over time, the techniques of the avant-garde have become a part of the mainstream. Indeed, this is why pieces such as Pierre Schaeffer’s *Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* and John Cage’s *4 33*” sometimes seem simple or cliché to modern ears - the conceptual and production techniques that make these compositions possible have been largely accepted by and incorporated into the everyday practices of modern audio composers.

In this way an understanding of the uses of noise within various avant-garde environments can also provide a prophetic voice concerning the future of audio production and

the concepts that underlie those productions. The modern avant-garde sound artist making use of noise, then, acts as a prophet in that he or she must find the signal within the noise before making it available to others. All of the artists included here demonstrate an amazing ability to see the signal within the noise, to see new possibilities buried in the detritus of the communication environment. Taken as a group, these artists show the amazing multiplicity and plasticity of noise as an element of audio composition.

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Audio List (in order of appearance)

*Etude Aux Chemins de Fer* by Pierre Schaeffer. From the album *OHM :01*

*4 33"* by John Cage.

*Discreet Music* by Brian Eno. From the album *Discreet Music*.

*Litany IV* by John Zorn. from the album *Six Litanies For Heliogabalus*.

*Degradation of Tapes* by Merzbow. from the album *1930*.