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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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An Aesthetics of Noise?
***On the Definition and Experience of Noise in a Musical
Context***

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University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT. In this article I consider the possibility of approaching the experience of noise in a musical context as an aesthetic one. I do this in the light of many 20th century musical developments, many of which have been described as increase in noise. Adopting a perspective from the discipline of sound studies, I examine some different approaches to noise and delineate three main claims concerning noise in music: (1) ontologically every sound is noise, (2) noise is distortion of musical form and, as my claim, (3) noise offers aesthetic pleasure mixed with unpleasant experience. To back up my proposal, I offer an example of (anti-)musical praxis of Noise music, proponents of which I see as striving to create works that would remain noise in reception, despite noise's tendency to succumb to familiarity and hence to lose its force as noise.

1. Introduction

What is noise? Such a basic, even naïve question shall be the point of departure of my paper. I am not the only one posing such a query, as the topic of noise in musical context has emerged with increasing force during the last ten years.² The milieu for this debate has primarily been that of so-called sound studies, itself a fairly recent field of research concerning sound in its various manifestations in different areas of practice and theory. To summarize briefly, sound studies is an interdisciplinary field of human and

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² In addition to various article-length texts, at least three major monographs of noise-research have been published during the last ten years, namely *Noise/Music – A History* by Paul Hegarty (2007), *Noise Matters – Towards an Ontology of Noise* by Greg Hainge (2013) and *Beyond Unwanted Sound – Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* by Marie Thompson (2017).

social sciences that addresses the role of sound in various conceptual configurations. Expanding the scope of musicology and acoustics to incorporate the traditions and methodologies of anthropology, history, sociology and media studies, to name but a few, the topic of sound studies are different sonic worlds and how they affect us, or are affected or even born into existence due to human action (Sterne, 2012, p. 3).

This movement of expansion in thinking sound beyond traditional musicological concepts has brought up new theoretical concerns, such as the role of noise in music. What is common to considerations of noise is that they devote significant amount of work to problematizing the concept of noise itself. There is a good reason for that: noise is a notoriously slippery term. As Marie Thompson describes it, noise “often functions as a floating signifier: it can be used to talk about almost anything” (Thompson, 2017, p. 2).

In the first place, the concept of noise appears, outside the discourse on music, in several different fields of enquiry, ranging from physics and acoustics via information theory to sociology and politics. Arguably the most researched perspective is noise as an environmental or occupational factor that may be harmful to the well-being of those who are exposed to it. A title of World Health Organization publication from 1966 puts the problematic nature of noise in a concise way: *Noise: An Occupational Hazard and Public Nuisance*. It is understood that modern world and its processes of industrialization and urbanization have created an increasingly noisy environment, the effects of which are studied in health sciences and psychology (see Jones & Chapman, 1984).

Another major field of research on noise is information theory. In that context approaches vary to a great extent, but in most cases noise is considered random information whereas signal is planned information. From the point of view of transmission of information, noise appears as a necessary evil: all signals contain an amount of noise and, correspondingly, engineering research is oriented towards minimizing transmitted random information in order to maximize intended information flow. In the particular case of audio information, noise can appear as background noise (unwanted sounds captured while recording a distinct sound; the “hum” or

“hiss” produced by the recording or playback equipment), distortion or other such phenomena that are considered as interference in relation to the intended signal (see Pierce, 1981).

Yet, neither of the previous approaches concerns itself very much with the *subjective* experience of noise as they are devoted to researching the (mostly harmful) effects of noise and how they might be minimized. And if we are to examine the possibility of noise as an aesthetic concept, subjectivity will have to come into play at some stage. In order to consider noise as a mode of aesthetic experience – or, from another perspective, a form or content revealed in a work of art – one would need to define what exactly that experience (or form or content) might consist of.

And therein lies the very problem. What do we make of the concept of noise in the first place? We can agree that, when talking about noise as subjective reception, we are addressing a certain kind of experience. A first-hand, common-sense idea of noise would be something akin to undesirable interruption in the subjectively felt flow of experience. Accordingly, many dictionary definitions of the word noise describe its one meaning as “intrinsically objectionable” (*Britannica*) or “unpleasant” and “disturbing” (*Oxford*) sound.

This unpleasantness, combined with the acoustical understanding of noise as irregular vibration producing a complex of sound waves of different frequencies, one gets to the core of the notion of noise as unmusical sound – musical sounds being traditionally understood as being those of regular vibration.³ From this equation we tend to make a division between music and noise and to associate the experience of music with pleasantness and that of noise with unpleasantness.

Yet, like sights, tastes and smells, responses to sounds vary according to the receiver. To take a step back from a musical context for a second, when

³ “Properly” musical tones and instruments were often strictly defined in the history of Western musical theory. For instance, in his influential *Musikalisches Lexikon* from 1802, Heinrich Christoph Koch defines a musical instrument by its ability to produce tones instead of noises (cited in van Eck, 2017, p.27). Likewise, 19th century physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, studying the physics of sound, based his acoustical research on the notion of harmony produced by consonance in tones and harmonic overtones in string instruments.

looking at noise from the subjective perspective it is easy to see that, appearing in experience, noise is extremely relative phenomenon. Even the sweetest, most pitch-perfect sounds feel like noise when emanating from the neighbour's apartment at 4 AM. Likewise, the steamy hiss and metallic screech of an old railway engine can be the favourite sound for a train enthusiast.

The problem with the definition of noise as disturbance, as something that we would be happier to be without, is that it does not get us very far in thinking about noise as a quality, let alone aesthetic quality. Can there be an aesthetics of noise? That would require a formulation of some kind of quality that we could affirm as being characteristic of noise in experience – noise as object of avoidance provides only a negative definition and concerns only the listeners' reaction to specific audio-events.

2. Noise as Sound

In order to tentatively approach the idea of noise-aesthetics, I shall now consider some appearances of noise in a musical or artistic setting. What to make of music as a site of noise? At least the acoustic environment seems to be a natural habitat of noise. Noise may be thought to be most acutely resisted factor namely in auditory reception, in comparison to, say, visual noise. Hearing the screech of chalk on a blackboard does seem to offend more than seeing a distorted image on badly tuned television. Accordingly, in everyday parlance the word noise is often associated to sound phenomena. Thus, noise seems to become readily apparent in the contexts of sound and music.⁴

⁴ The notion of the inherent intimacy of sound – against the supposed distance created and maintained by vision – speaks on behalf of noise as being most immediate namely in the audio realm. Here it must be noted that the assumption of sound's immersive quality has come under criticism in the field of sound studies (see e.g. Sterne, 2003, p. 15; Kim-Cohen, 2016, pp. 6–7) as following a false and outmoded dichotomy between orality and literacy that in effect obscures novel advances in thinking about sonic cultures. Yet, I appeal to everyday experience in claiming that the boundaries of audio-noise are more porous than those of visual noise: we cannot shield ourselves from sound in the same manner as from excessive visual content (sound penetrates physical barriers and we cannot avert our hearing like we can turn away our gaze).

Despite traditional musicological emphasis on music as formal arrangement of clear and distinct tones, 20th century musical developments have sometimes been characterized as increase in noise within the prevailing musical idiom (Ross, 2007, p. xvi). Since Edgard Varèse's utilization of non-traditional orchestral instruments such as sirens in *Amériques* (1921) and the *intonarumori* noise maker devices of the Futurist composer Luigi Russolo from 1910's onwards, modern art music's expanded tonalities – achieved by compositional and instrumental means – have been received not only as dissonant, but also as “noisy” in a more general way. In music produced by the standard Romantic orchestra, one rather straightforward factor to the experience of noisiness might be the increasing use of percussion instruments in art music (see Riddell, 1996, p. 161).

Perception of noisiness applies also to altogether new musical effects in experimental and popular music, such as the possibility of distortion and feedback introduced by electrically amplified sound, the use of synthesized or computer-generated sounds, as well as recordings or samples of any kind of acoustic phenomena used as compositional material.

Reactions to new musical forms or timbres as noise are not restricted to the use of instruments or technology outside the romantic orchestras' instrumental variety. Now well-established features of classical orchestral works such as Richard Wagner's famous “Tristan chord” in *Tristan und Isolde* (1859) or Igor Stravinsky's use of building crescendos and dissonance in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) have elicited accusations of them being noise rather than music at the time of their premieres.

Thus, on the basis of this it would seem that noise – as a concept taken in a musical context – would align itself as opposite to music “proper” and be evaluated as undesirable element against the pleasurable presence of music.

A major current in studies of noise and music adopts this presumption. For instance, Paul Hegarty, author of the first monograph devoted solely to noise in music, claims that “[w]hat exactly noise is, or what it should do, alters through history, and this means that any account of noise is a history of disruptions and disturbances. This means that the history of noise is like a history of the avant-garde ...” Yet, as history of the avant-garde is not

linear, but concerns the very ruptures that work against the idea of smooth progression, avant-garde – and, by extension, noise – is “constantly failing ... as it becomes familiar or acceptable practice.” The result of this kind of understanding of noise is that “noise is a negativity (it can never be positively, definitively and timelessly located)” (Hegarty, 2007, p. ix).

On the basis of such a claim, it is clear to see that the noise–music dichotomy is, at least to some degree, a historical and cultural state of affairs, susceptible to change over time. However, it remains to be questioned whether there is still room for noise as negativity or “anti-music” as it could be argued fairly convincingly that after all the artistic and technological developments of the 20th century, it has become difficult to evaluate any sound as intrinsically “non-musical” and as a result of this relegated to the category of noise. This is due not only to changing cultural habits, that is, the shifting paradigm of what music can be and what we expect and tolerate as listeners, but crucially also due to changes in the production of music itself – and this leads us to consider an ontological claim on noise where noise is affirmed as sound in itself without any intrinsic value judgments.

I nominate that approach “noise-ontology” with its claim being “all sound is noise”.

3. Noise-Ontology

In the contemporary situation where most of the musical content we encounter is electro-acoustic – i.e. produced via studio techniques utilizing both acoustic and electronically generated sounds, composed and compiled via audio collage of several different sources and takes, and disseminated via recordings over loudspeakers – we encounter an ontological situation where everything we hear can be reduced to alternating audio frequencies without intrinsic evaluation or categorization. This sonic regime could be named a “democracy” of sound. Sonic environmentalist R. Murray Schafer nominated the “dissociation” between “the sound from the makers of sound” as “schizophonia” (Schafer, 1969, p. 43), predicting a changing, more stressful relationship between our sensing bodies and our environment.

Assuming more positive perspective, pioneering composer of *musique concrète* Pierre Schaeffer called this type of listening to sound-as-it-is “acousmatic” (from the Greek *akousmata*, “the things heard”) as encountering musical sound without traditional trappings of performative gesturality detaches the ideal listener from cultural conditioning and enables a more receptive and analytical mode of listening (Schaeffer, 2004, pp. 76–77).

In media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s description of the contemporary acousmatic situation, brought about by sound recording media, “our ears ... have been trained immediately to filter voices, words and sounds out of noise” whereas electronic sound recording, editing and reproduction machines register “acoustic events as such” (Kittler, 1999, p. 23). Kittler’s wording *as such* could here be read to mean *acousmatically*.

Separated from the master-text of the musical score, sounds arranged on the surface of a recording medium construct a flat ontological plane of sound where every event is to be evaluated on equal grounds, without prioritizing typical affordances of sonic information. In such horizontal sound-ontology there can be no intrinsically “wrong” notes or sounds. The understanding of sounds as frequencies or sound as noise, ontologically speaking, is emphasized especially by the experimentalist streak in music, interested in the properties of sound itself, exploring and expanding the range of sensations that can be acquired via “sonic materialism”.

Edgard Varèse’s notion of music as “organized sound/noise” (*son organisé*), or John Cage’s discovery of a perpetual background noise produced by the perceiving body itself, thus making ideal silence impossible, open a way to approach every acoustic event as being contingent in value. What could be evaluated is the success of organization of a certain musical work; yet such evaluations must take place “as such” in each case, without relying on pre-given values that would be universally applicable to all music.

Yet, if we adopt the ontological view that every sound is noise, does the term retain any qualitative power of distinction? Noise-ontological stance affirms the heterogeneity of the sound-world and acts to maintain an open horizon for future sound-events. Yet, what we lose here is noise’s special

character: to be of distinctive quality. If we are to consider the experience of noise as an aesthetic one, the ontological view erases the critical difference of noise.

Hence, another approach should be considered – one where noise is linked to interference, distortion and degradation of form, to the increase of the factor that one, after Georges Bataille, could call the *informe* or formlessness in musical works.

4. Noise-Informatics

This view links the use of noise with the understanding of the concept as it is applied in various strands of information theory – noise as distortion and interference in the transmission signal of information. Further, applied to the social context, this perspective encompasses also the confrontational and transgressive strategies applied by various avant-garde movements in the arts. Even though the definition of noise may be subject to contingencies of taste and norm in different historical situations, what is not contextual is the process of degradation or deformation: noise distorts the assumed “good form” and constitutes an attack on the prevailing values of society, resulting in the formless (*informe*). This confrontational approach can be seen in, for instance, the attitudes of the Futurist movement.

Luigi Russolo, composer and inventor of Futurist music and noise-making instruments, sets noise namely *against* musical values in his manifesto *The Art of Noises*:

From the beginning, musical art sought out and obtained purity and sweetness of sound. Afterwards, it brought together different sounds, still preoccupying itself with caressing the ear with suave harmonies. As it grows ever more complicated today, musical art seeks out combinations more dissonant, stranger, and harsher for the ear. Thus, it comes ever closer to the *noise-sound*. [...] Musical sound is too limited in its variety of timbres. [...] *We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.* (Russolo, 1986, pp. 24–25)

The quote makes explicit the notion that it is the state of the then-current musical climate in relation to modernized world that *The Art of Noises* reacts to. True enough, Russolo formulates categories and classifications of various noises with a connoisseur's relish, which would suggest also an experimentalist, noise-ontological motivation for the use of noise: to utilize the "infinite variety" of hitherto unmusical sounds. Nevertheless, Russolo does not restrict his characterization of noise to loud or abrasive sounds only, but seems to include any type of "found sounds" that originate from somewhere else than established musical instrumentation. Inherent noisiness of the novel sounds is not necessary, as the act of transgression against established musical values is of primary importance for Russolo.

Here the forms under attack, and thus also the results of deforming them, are to a large degree defined by the status quo. This view can also include the idea, most recently brought forth by philosopher François J. Bonnett, that there is no access to the ontological "level" of sound as our hearing is always-already conditioned by context: "Even though the sonorous is fundamentally not a language, the listening that targets it seeks, and has always sought, to identify within it signifying information that is in part conventional and thus arbitrary" (Bonnett, 2016, p. 112). Thus what the offence of noise concerns is not "pure" sound in its supposedly ontologically raw state, but rather the violation of structures and forms that are historically contingent.

Both positions described previously, i.e. (1) noise-ontology and (2) noise-informatics, seem relevant and explain many of the motivations behind composers and musicians, contemporary and historical, whose work has been received as "merely" noise. However, what I find lacking in the two approaches is that they make possible the reduction of the experience of noise either into reactions emerging from (1) unfamiliarity with new sounds and compositional methods or (2) offence taken from transgression of current norms. While very useful, both noise-ontology and noise-informatics contain a teleology: ideally, what is now perceived as noise will become music once the audience is enlightened enough to receive it as music, and this will take place via certain historical-dialectical progress. In this teleology the actual experience of noise-as-noise is easily set aside.

Therefore, I suggest, we should try to formulate a third kind of approach to noise: “noise-aesthetics” where “noise can remain noise and bring both displeasure and pleasure.”

5. Noise-Aesthetics

This perspective considers noise as a type of aesthetic experience, as a certain *quality* in perception. Granted, the experience of the “pure” ontological materiality of sound (1) and the transgressive distortion of currently prevailing “good form” (2) can be included in the experience of noise; yet, not every sound emphasizing its materiality or transgression of convention is noise. What I suggest is that for noise to be noise, it must contain a remainder of displeasure that cannot be soothed by historical process of becoming-music.

Both ontological and transgressive perspectives on noise include, at least in implicit manner, the notion of fragility and fleetingness of noise: noise is an event that quickly fades into familiarity once its disruptive force is assimilated. A tension between disappearance and persistence then appears. In my view, what proves the existence of this tension is artistic praxis devoted to the study of the fleeting fragility of noise: as an example, I take up the genre of Noise music.

Speaking of Noise as a genre of (anti-?) music is problematic in itself. For is it not the case that noise appears in various contexts – as an event rather than structure? Marie Thompson is understandably critical of whether we should approach noise as a genre (i.e. Noise music), as the idea of noise turns up in various different musical contexts and, for her, might not form a musical genre as such (Thompson, 2017, p. 130). I would, however, claim that one can indeed talk of Noise music as genre – cultural practice, a “style” of doing – in the light of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. There, no category is natural but is rather a network of heterogeneous actants producing said category into existence. Here, heterogeneity is the key concept: there is no single essence to define certain social situation, but entities ranging from abstract information to concrete objects take part in constructing a real network that has certain consistency over time and can

thus be given an identity.

Noise music, then, would be an amalgamation of different theoretical and practical lineages that collide and gather consistency, especially in a specific situation in late 1970's. This takes place when post-war experimental music, which had in earlier decades flourished mainly within the sphere of electronic music studios of universities or national broadcast agencies, becomes suddenly an available resource for sound and performance artists, electronics enthusiasts, countercultural extremists etc. The catalyst of this event is the punk rock movement, which brought about ideas of a democratization of music's production and distribution processes – the famous do-it-yourself and anyone-can-do-it attitude of self-produced recordings and magazines of the punk scene. This is surely a gross simplification of a complex event, but the result was a quick blooming of an international scene devoted to focusing on and cultivating the experience of noise.⁵

In terms of noise's fleeting quality, the reason of Noise music is to create works that would be able to postpone the inevitable fading of the noise-event, i.e. to enable noise to remain noise. The aesthetic value of noise would then, for me, involve the pleasure of encountering something that possesses the shock of the new – in itself a challenging experience of (1) disruptive materiality and/or (2) compositional deformity or cultural transgression. In addition to this experience of novelty or transgression, the aim would be to create noise with such force that the work is able to extend this displeasure over time, yet be interesting enough to draw the listener into it.

As a mode of experience that involves conflicting factors of pleasure

⁵ Further elaboration of Noise music's genealogy is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper. However, alongside experimental music, the cultural transgressions of avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dada and Fluxus can be mentioned here as predecessors. Similarly, the influence of 1960's Viennese Actionism and 1970's American performance and body art can be discerned in the work of late-1970's/early-1980's foundational noise artists or groups, such as Throbbing Gristle or The New Blockaders in the UK, Maurizio Bianchi and Giancarlo Toniutti in Italy, Merzbow and Incapacitants in Japan and The Haters in US, to mention only a few of the more established names. I refer the reader to Hegarty's *Noise/Music – A History* (2007) for a more extensive treatment of this subject.

and pain, noise bears similarities to the aesthetic category of the sublime. The experience of the sublime has been described as being a state where the experiencing subjects' boundaries are being transgressed and a vertigo-like feeling of loss of control ensues. In the case of the Kantian interpretation, it must be noted that the sublime does not reside in the object of attention itself but rather in the experience of it – the fearful recognition of a vast power combined with becoming conscious of the superiority of our reason over nature. This guarantees the aesthetic pleasure of the experience.

Noise, however, would require a post-Kantian willingness to succumb to the boundary-erasing complexity of information presented. Noise music's relentless focus on noise-sounds, instead of musical structures, offers this experience of complexity – and loss of control in comprehending or forming mental representations of the content. Lacking exact descriptions, one has to do with tentative, metaphorical delineations of the audio content using words such as “abrasive”, “crushing”, “caustic” etc.

As an example of such descriptions we can take up one supplied by Drew Daniel, who in his monograph study of Throbbing Gristle's now-classic album *20 Jazz Funk Greats* (1979) describes his first encounter with such material, having purchased the group's earlier album *The Second Annual Report* (1977) as an adolescent punk rock fan:

Then I put on Throbbing Gristle and my head split open. Locked on at high volume in my little prison of sound, I was utterly confounded by what I heard. This was not a punk rock record; this was not a rock record; this wasn't even music [...] by the end of side one, the piercing synthetic shrieks, ferociously overdriven fuzz bass and visceral low-end throb [...] had given me a truly punishing headache. I never made it to side two that day. I had finally found art strong enough to cause me physical pain, and I loved it. (Daniel, 2008, p. 10.)

Piercing, ferocious, visceral... Descriptions that focus on the *experience* of noise. Such experience, informed by the post-Kantian turn in the concept of the sublime, would then be akin to philosopher Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Kant's theory of the sublime. For Deleuze, subjectivity harbours within itself a fundamental discrepancy with no possibility of a

harmonious function of the different faculties and this becomes evident in the sublime experience. As Deleuze describes it in his lecture course on Kant, the sublime initiates a series of “catastrophes” occurring upon the synthesis of perception; the series proceeding from overwhelming sensation via fragmentation of perception to inability to recognize any forms (Vanhanen, 2010, pp. 53–54).

With corresponding disorientation occurring in the reception of noise, the possibility of finding aesthetic pleasure in noise necessitates that one succumbs to it and affirms that categories of listening, sound and music can become scrambled and, in fact, constantly do so beneath the level of conscious perception. Being overwhelmed by audial texture, volume or complexity of form is – to paraphrase Deleuze speaking of the sublime – a process of “exploding” the expectancy of what music should “properly” be, and this explosion of categories, combined with the overwhelming amount of information that a complex sound provides, may allow the aesthetic pleasure of displeasurable noise.

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