

The Art of Noise after Futurism

Industrial Noise Music, Field Recording and the Sixth Sense of Sound Art

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In 1913 a member of the Italian Futurist art movement, painter Luigi Russolo, wrote a letter to his friend and fellow Futurist Francesco Balilla Pratella in the form of a manifesto entitled *L'arte dei rumori* (later translated into *The Art of Noises*). This manifesto was to become one of the most influential texts on musical aesthetics in the 20th century. In the manifesto Russolo put forth the idea of a new kind of music or an evolution of contemporary music that would reflect the modern industrialized world, which fascinated the Futurists so much. He wanted the noisy sounds of machines and urban life to be the actual tones and timbres of which music consisted. Russolo wished to radically change people's perception of what music could be. He wanted to expand our vocabulary of sounds and felt the time was right for musical noise.¹

Russolo started building mechanical noise instruments to produce the sounds he wanted for musical purpose. He divided noise-sounds into several categories and built a different instrument for each one. He would then perform with orchestras of people playing the different noise instruments in compositions depicting modern life with titles such as *Risveglio di una città* (*Awakening of a City*) and *Convegno d'aeroplani e d'automobili* (*The Meeting of Aeroplanes and Automobiles*) both performed for the first time in 1914.

With his ideas and innovations many consider Russolo to be the father or inventor of noise music, which is today an established music genre.² In this article I intend to explore the musical evolution from Russolo to contemporary noise music and to discuss the difference between Russolo's art of noises and noise music today. I want to emphasize that Russolo called his music – and the music he wanted contemporary music to evolve into – an art of noises, as in *sounds*, not simply a noise music.³ This opens up to a new understanding of Russolo's ideas about incorporating noises into music. Because that is what he wanted: to produce noises in a musical context that would represent the modern industrialized world with its many noises coming from the industry's machines and other technology. But at the same time these noises were to fuse and create a more abstract musical soundscape that was more than the sum of its elements. In this way, Russolo's music was more a music of noises than a noise music per se.

I wish to trace the heritage of Russolo and his manifesto by demonstrating how most of his ideas are present in a lot of recent sound art that deals with recorded sounds and noises, and not so much in the noise music descending from the Futurists and other avant-garde movements. His idea of music has much more to do with the so-called industrial music of Britain's Throbbing Gristle or the

French *musique concrète* than the synthetic and electronic noise bursts of for instance today's Japanese noise scene founded and led by such acts as Hanatarash, Hijokaidan, Incapacitants and Merzbow. Nevertheless, these are the ones given the label of noise music.

What is noise? A short etymology

Can noise be defined? According to Danish noise and music theorist Torben Sangild one single definition isn't possible. He instead provides three basic definitions of noise: an acoustic (relying purely on physics), a communicative (distortion or disturbance of a communicative signal) and a subjective one (what is noise to one person can be meaningful to another; what was considered unpleasant sound yesterday is not today).⁴ None of them being musical, all of these definitions can be related to music. Acoustic noise like white noise (as that of an untuned radio) is used or approached in much noise rock and in harsh noise music. Distorting the electrical signal of an instrument is present in almost all harder rock music in the form of feedback or similar. And if noise wasn't a subjective term, a discussion about which sounds can be considered musical sounds wouldn't be as complicated.

Sangild also traces the meaning of the word noise in most Western languages to mean something aggressive, powerful and disturbing, filled with tension. It comes from the Greek *nausea* referring both to the roaring sea and the seasickness it causes. And for instance the German word for noise *Geräusch* derives from *Rausch*, which means intoxication.⁵

All these different meanings give an impression of noise not only meaning something powerful and disturbing but also something with a powerful, intoxicating or unpleasant effect. Thereby it stands somewhat in contrast to some of the basic ideas of Western musical theory such as beauty, melody and harmony. So what is noise in relation to music? Is it a nauseating music? A type of music without melody or harmony? Or music with no submission to rules or musical theory, consisting of abstract sounds with no obvious source or purpose?

The problem with noise music

What we today refer to as noise music has a complex history. It bares obvious traces of the Futurists and other pre-war avant-gardes as well as other early 20th century musical innovators such as Schönberg, Debussy or Stravinsky.⁶ But the most noticeable influences come possibly from the European and American avant-gardes of the 1950s and 60s where also electronic music plays a distinct role in musical composition, the most influential figures here perhaps being Karlheinz Stockhausen, Edgard Varèse and of course John Cage.

Noise theorist Paul Hegarty argues that some of Cage's work with its incidental sounds represents perfectly the tension between desirable and undesirable sound that according to Hegarty is one of

the main characteristics of noise music.⁷ One can almost draw a straight line from Cage's experiments in the past to the most radical noise bands of today. For instance Incapacitants whose aim it is to produce "pure noise" uninfluenced by musical ideas or even human intention echoes Cage's ideas of freeing music by letting any sound be musical sound. The incidental is a basic aspect of Cage's so-called chance music as for instance his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* from 1951 where 12 radios play differently depending on what is being aired and how the performers adjust the radio tuners.

Merzbow is perhaps the most radical noise musician today with over 300 releases since 1979 consisting mainly of continuous harsh noise that gives the listener almost no chance to determine the source of the sounds in the music.

However the sonic universe of this and most contemporary noise music is mainly synthetic and explores a parallel world of sound that is produced mainly through experiments with electronics or extreme distortion of amplified sounds and instruments. Noise music is about finding the most abstract sounds that man can create. It is about exploring and digging deep into the backside of music pushing the limit of musical sound. It is equally as fascinated or occupied with technology as say the Futurists but stands in great contrast to Russolo's ideas of representing the world he was living in by reproducing the sounds it created.

Using electronics in music or composing music entirely on electronic devices like synthesizers or computers will almost inevitably have a synthetic sound less true to life. And therefore not be in accordance with Russolo's idea of music that depicts the real world.

A concrete music

Searching for a Russolian music depicting the surrounding world through concrete sound compositions (a music of noises) it is much more rewarding to first look at the so-called *musique concrète* movement of post-war France. Like Russolo's music *musique concrète* bases musical composition on the use of real life sounds. Russolo couldn't record sounds, and therefore imitated them, but by the 1940s technology had made it possible to record and store sound on records (or the latest invention of magnetic tape) for later transformation into musical compositions. And in the case of *musique concrète* this transformation was achieved by cutting up, speeding up, reversing or looping the recorded sounds. Pierre Schaeffer who gave the music its name in 1948 borrowed his aesthetics from the sound of broken shellac records cutting up and accidentally looping bits of a recording. He started playing around, manipulating and intentionally cutting up sounds that he recorded onto records and then played on numerous record players simultaneously to make sound collages. Schaeffer also layered the sound instead of merely cutting and splicing bits of sound together. He later shifted to using only tape recordings and hereby expanded on the montage experiments made with

sound on celluloid film by pioneers like Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann.⁸ With his inventions Schaeffer led a whole movement of European radio-technicians-gone-composers producing radio broadcasted sound experiments through tape manipulation. The sounds he used were everyday sounds of for instance railway stations as on *Etude aux Chemins de Fer (Railroad Study, 1948)*. Hereby he can be seen as a successor of Russolo at the same time expanding the technique and instruments using the latest available technology.

A music of industry

The sound of industry, the aesthetics of breaking machinery and the cut-up technique of *musique concrète* was inspirational to the British performance art and musical group Throbbing Gristle who in the late 1970s invented the term industrial music to give name to their record label Industrial Records. A hate towards the record industry made them run their label as a sort of parody of that industry (hence the name) and a noisy destructive aesthetics was adopted to contrast the pop music of the time. But the industrial analogy goes farther than that. Throbbing Gristle's sound was made up of playing around with machines and recording in an abandoned factory in an industrial outskirt. It literally became an industrial sound. This influenced other contemporary bands and later the term industrial as a genre has been used to describe the music of Throbbing Gristle and other British groups of that period along with German bands like Einstürzende Neubauten. It is used to describe music that uses the sounds of the industry as musical sounds. Instruments are a blend of rock instruments, electronics and actual machines like power tools. Also the use of tape loops and cut-ups are present in especially the music of Throbbing Gristle. The sound and themes of the music reflects ambivalence towards technology and industry by on one hand being fascinated with the sounds of electronics and machines but also being the sound of machinery breaking and the dream of modern life shattering. The sound often has an overall gloomy even dystopian feel.

As Sangild agrees Russolo's music can be seen as an early form of industrial music.⁹ Though his music was, in accordance with his Futurist sentiments, purely a fascination with and even a tribute to modern life (industry, speed and technology) the idea of music as a depiction of modern technological life and of making music about machines, using those very machines is present here in an early form.

Though there wasn't much talk of industrial music before them, Throbbing Gristle can then be seen as being on the verge of making an actual post-industrial music; at least when seen in continuation of Russolo. It is some of the first music to turn the wonders of electronic sound into something negative and dystopian, but it is still only the beginning of a music reflecting on life after the boom of an industrial age.

Looking for a music or art that keeps the ideas of Russolo alive today by elaborating on them and bringing them up to date both musically, technologically and ideologically, I want to bring attention to a fairly new branch of music or sound art that incorporates the ideas of Russolo in a much more accurate way than the music that calls itself and is called noise music and that actually doesn't even explore a noisy or destructive aesthetics that much in doing so.

The return of the real noises

Using the same source material but leaving out the cut-up techniques of *musique concrète* and expanding on the budding post-industrialism of Throbbing Gristle, field recorders are putting out entire albums of highly innovative recordings of the world surrounding them.

Field recording is the practice of taking microphones and recording equipment outside the studio and recording the sounds of "the real world" in the most direct least manipulated way. Mobile recording equipment has been improving continuously since the 1940s and today microphones are available that can pick up even the smallest sounds and vibrations. One type, the contact microphone, consists of an ultrathin plate of ceramic so-called piezoelectric material that can pick up microscopic vibrations going through solid objects. It just has to be in contact with its surface. This is now the technological foundation for a whole group of sound artist that base their work on the field recording technique, most prominently perhaps Japanese artist Toshiya Tsunoda who specializes in recording the sound of inert matter and the insides of hollow objects.

Born in 1964 in Kanagawa in the Greater Tokyo Area, Tsunoda received his Masters degree from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. He now lives and works in Yokohama. He first started releasing his work in public in 1994 and has released albums on both his own as well as European and American record labels throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Unlike new age recording artists of the 1970s who put out meditative albums with the sound of the ocean, the wind in the trees or birds singing, Tsunoda uses his microphones to reveal and offer his listener a trip into a whole universe of sounds we have never heard before, because we haven't been able to. We can't fit into most hollow objects and we aren't able to sense when most surfaces vibrate just a little. Through Tsunoda's recordings we get a chance to go there and to sense those objects in a new way.

Titles like *The Air Vibration Inside a Hollow, Low Frequency Observed at Maguchi Bay, Vibrational Movements of Metal Plates* or "Solid Vibration of the Surface of a Concreted Wharf where a Marine Products Market Used to Be" give an impression of the microcosmic or even metaphysical universe that Tsunoda's art is devoted to. In Tsunoda's best work the sounds of vibrating surfaces or air travelling through the insides of pipes and other hollow objects come together and even borders on musical composition in an ambient repetitive manner. A great example is from his 2002 al-

bum *Pieces of Air*, which deals with the sound of air, steam and gasses moving and its effect on surfaces. In the track “Inside of a Pipe at the Seashore 1” the sound is as implied recorded inside a pipe at water level on the seashore. A distant whistling of wind or air running through the pipe mixes with the sound of the ocean just outside. Every now and then a wave hits the pipe and creates a bass-heavy plastic-like resonance easily confused with a beat or rhythm. This is where the recordings come closest to Russolo’s industrial symphonies and *musique concrète*’s sound compositions of the everyday: when Tsunoda stumbles upon a microscopic real life musical composition in his surrounding environment.

A sixth sense

Russolo said that there was no silence left in the world because of industry and city life. With Tsunoda even the seemingly tranquil soundscape outside the city is not silent, but filled with a microcosm of noises. You could even say that his recordings become *clairaudient*¹⁰ because they deal with sound that is not present in the world as it is sensed by human perception. The microphone or recording device becomes clairaudient in the way that it presents an extra-sensory perception of this world and thereby represents a world of sounds “hidden” from the human ear.

The concept of clairaudient art echoes of course Walter Benjamin’s idea of the *profane illumination* linked with the Surrealist experience of art and everyday objects, which he felt could have revolutionary potential as described in his 1929 essay on Surrealism.¹¹ The concept of clairaudience in sound art brings actual sounds that are out of reach to the listener’s attention. It illuminates that realm of sound, which is often overheard because it belongs to objects we have decided are mute. And at the same time clairaudience functions as a mere auditory equivalent to Benjamin’s idea. Clairaudient sound art can help us expand our vocabulary of sounds and be a revolution of the sense of hearing, just as Russolo wanted.

Furthermore Tsunoda’s work can be seen as a continuation of the idea of industrial music. Unlike Russolo’s symphony of the great modern capital, Tsunoda rejects and leaves the city, focusing on the backside of industrialisation and urbanisation. He lives in the most densely populated area in the world, the Greater Tokyo Area, yet his recordings bear no witness of city life. As a field recorder, he could fill his DAT-tapes with all the furious, rampant and powerful sounds of the biggest city in the world, yet he chooses to walk the beaches of Yokohama and record little objects near the seashore that hardly make any sound at all. He fills his recordings with the noises of emptiness, of the outskirts and of technological material void.

If Russolo’s art of noises was the first industrial music, Tsunoda’s is the soundtrack of a post-industrial state of mind but an art of noises indeed. Tsunoda’s music, like *musique concrète*, isn’t

really noisy. It just deals with noises (unwanted, overlooked or simply non-musical sounds) and can be associated with Russolo through the idea of industrial music – being the music depicting Modernity and technological life.

Russolo is not just the father of noise music. He can be seen as the father and predecessor of many of the ideas on which Modern music is founded.

One could say that the legacy from Russolo goes at least two ways. It has both inspired and helped lay the grounds for noisy music in general (dissonance, atonality, distortion, incidental composing, noisy aesthetics etc.) and thus for today's noise music. But perhaps most of all he is the originator of the use of noises in music: everyday sounds and the sounds of modern life as musical material – that is truly the heritage of Luigi Russolo.

Notes

¹ Russolo 2004: 10-11.

² Russolo is often credited as the first to talk of noise as music. See for instance Hegarty 2007: 5, Sangild 2003: 18-19, Sangild 2002: 9 or Cox & Warner 2004: 60.

³ The word *rumore* is Italian for noise (singular, a noise), but it also simply means a sound. As in English a sound can be noisy, loud or unexpected and is then called a noise. The plural *rumori* (used in the manifesto) translates into sounds, noises or simply noise. Alas an early translation of the manifesto entitled it *The Art of Noise* (Robert Filliou's translation originally published in 1967 by Something Else Press) while a later one has used the title *The Art of Noises* (translated by Barclay Brown and published in 1986 by Pendragon Press). Both translations make occasional use of the hyphenated *noise-sound* trying to provide an accurate meaning.

⁴ Sangild 2003: 12-13, Sangild 2002: 5-8.

⁵ Sangild 2003: 10, Sangild 2002: 5.

⁶ For an ample description of the experiments in new musical language by composers Arnold Schönberg, Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky and others see Ross 2007: 43-66, 93-105.

⁷ Hegarty 2007: 5.

⁸ For details on the radio montage *Wochenende* (*Weekend*, 1928) by Walter Ruttmann, see Cory 1992: 340-41.

⁹ Sangild 2003: 18, 32-33.

¹⁰ Clairaudience literally means *clear hearing*. The term is used by soundscape theorist Raymond Murray Schafer to describe “clean hearing”, a “total appreciation of the acoustic environment” and “exceptional powers of hearing”. See Schafer 1994: 4, 10-11.

Adding to this the term's use within parapsychology where it alongside clairvoyance describes

sensing in a paranormal manner, the term could be used to describe works by sound artists such as Toshiya Tsunoda, Christina Kubisch, Jacob Kirkegaard and Mats Björk.

¹¹ Benjamin 1999: 215-16.

Bibliography

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Discography

Both the music and liner notes of these releases have contributed to the descriptions of recordings in the article and this list also functions as a good starting point in exploring the history of the music(s) mentioned.

Hanatarash: 2. Alchemy Records, 1988.

Hijokaidan: *King Of Noise*. Alchemy Records, 1985.

Incapacitants: *As Loud As Possible*. Zabriskie Point, 1995.

Merzbow: *1930*. Tzadik, 1998.

Throbbing Gristle: *The Second Annual Report*, Industrial Records, 1977.

Toshiya Tsunoda: *Extract From Field Recording Archive #2: The Air Vibration Inside a Hollow*. Håpna, 1999.

Toshiya Tsunoda: *Extract from Field Recording Archive #3: Solid Vibration*. Infringitive, 2001.

Toshiya Tsunoda: *Pieces of Air*. Lucky Kitchen, 2002.

Various artists: *An Anthology Of Noise & Electronic Music / First A-Chronology 1921-2001*. Sub

Rosa, 2002.

Various artists: *Musica Futurista: The Art of Noises*. Salon, 2004.