



Crosscurrents : American and European music in interaction, 1900-2000

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Paul Sacher Foundation Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014, 520 p.

Publié à l'occasion de la conférence internationale qui s'est tenue à l'Université de Harvard puis à l'Université de Munich en 2008 et 2009, ce volumineux ouvrage reprend l'intégralité des contributions et des échanges. L'ambition de vouloir couvrir une période aussi vaste contraint la lecture à une approche diachronique et une connaissance impeccable des faits historiques qui servent de toile de fond aux analyses. Les « interactions » dont il est question dans le titre ne concerne à proprement parler que la question des échanges entre Amérique du Nord et Europe. On ne trouvera guère de références liées à l'influence des musiques savantes et populaires du Brésil ou de l'Argentine par exemple. Il est frappant de constater combien les relations étroites entre musiciens et institutions de part et d'autre de l'Atlantique ont été vitales pour le développement de la vie musicale en général. Que ce soit par choix ou par nécessité (économique ou politique), les musiciens voyagent d'un continent à l'autre dans le but de se perfectionner ou souvent, de faire carrière. Les motivations fluctuent en fonctions des événements politiques, passant d'une nécessité purement pédagogique à des déplacements liés à l'exil, pendant la seconde guerre mondiale notamment. Une partie importante des textes évoque l'importance des tournées au cours desquelles orchestres et solistes sillonnaient l'océan pour donner des concerts ou pour participer à des festivals de musique. Un éclairage intéressant est fait autour de l'importance des publications bilatérales, éditions de textes et de partitions mais également enregistrements sonores, qui

ont permis de mieux faire connaître ce qui se passait des deux côtés de l'Atlantique. On y apprend la différence de regard sur l'actualité et la notion de recherche musicale — différences culturelles également concernant la façon d'appréhender le fait musical avec des références relatives à une éducation et une sensibilité singulière. Ces regards croisés prennent une tout autre dimension avec l'irruption des flux radio-phoniques et audiovisuels dans les années 40 et, par la suite, Internet et les réseaux numériques qui font des réseaux transatlantiques des lieux de débats et d'échanges inédits. En marge des contributions rédigées par des chercheurs et des historiens, on ne manquera pas de s'attarder à la fin du recueil sur les entretiens entre Paul Hillier et Steve Reich d'une part, Vivian Perlis et Betsy Jolas de l'autre. On y retrouve les notions d'identité nationale et de communauté culturelle qui tantôt cohabitent, s'opposent ou se fécondent mutuellement.

David Verdier



Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond

Hillel Schwartz
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Zone Books, 2011, 928 p.

Noise is proving to be the anti-Enlightenment concept *par excellence*. In particular, it has become a foil to conventional musicology, with the latter's usual reliance on the stability and order of tones and forms. Noise is errant timbre, arrhythmia, the non-harmonic. Further on, noise is other, imperfection, excess, revolt — socio-cultural rupture, political ferocity, the intercession of the Real, confounder of positivists — always operating somewhere between the cheeky and the terrifying. Noise is methodological, disciplinary and sonic resistance to all those naive, staid and oppressive symbolic systems. Unwanted sound? Says who, Dad?

But you're fairly likely to know all that already. If a series of well-known monographs on the subject (by, among others, Attali, Kahn and Hegarty) hasn't persuaded you, the better part of a century of avant-garde aesthetics, in both popular and non-popular musics, will have. Noise has provided the terra incognita for modernists, the shock factor for punks and that alluring *je ne sais quoi* for postmodern theorists. And as an extensively general subject, very friendly as a broad metaphor and apparently happy to be diagnosed at the discretion of the scholar, the machinations of noise can be read into an almost endless array of cultural, historical and aesthetic scenarios. The discourse on noise has typically provided invigorating helpings of the imagination and provocation its subject is held to provide, but it has often been expressionistically and poetically sketched from within a flurry theoretical and historical reference. Hillel Schwartz's *Making Noise* is the apotheosis of this kind of writing on noise, and makes its antecedents look as sparse and precise

as mathematical treatises. In the process, it encapsulates exactly what has been most frustrating about noise literature, and suggests that a new conception of the subject is pressing.

To be sure, *Making Noise* is a spectacular, extraordinary text. Its 859 pages are each so full of historical reference that citations are made in bulk and the endnotes have to be downloaded from the publishers. Schwartz, an independent cultural historian, cuts a jagged yet usually convincing path through what often feels like every moment of world history and culture. The findings of thousands of potential or already existing monographs are squeezed into his restless tale of tales, and the connections he manages to suggest and by which he roams from point to point are frequently staggering. Though the book lacks a bibliography, the endnotes (or “Reverb”) almost certainly amounts to the longest and most comprehensive sound studies reading list in existence, and contains lots more besides. For like many works of sound studies it has a strong interdisciplinary dynamic, much like Schwartz’s previous books *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles, Century’s End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1990s through the 1990s* and *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat*. As he himself puts it, “I shall trespass on aeronautics, aesthetics, anatomy, astronomy, burglary, dentistry, industrial engineering, marine biology, neurology, nursing, oceanography, penology, psychiatry, warfare, and worship, for ‘unwanted sound’ resonates across fields, subject everywhere and everywhen to debate, contest, reversal, repetition: to history.” This roll call is rather an understatement.

Yet for all its bravura thickness and its wealth of fascinating material, *Making Noise* is fatally thin on conclusions. With such a diversity of material

inside it, conclusions might seem impossible, even besides the point. Yet ironically, all of this diversity prompts Schwartz to make wry poetic generalisations about the character of noise after many of his anecdotes. While Schwartz will doubtlessly introduce all of his readers to an episode in discourses on sound that they had not previously encountered, he offers few new conceptions of noise and essentially no new theory. Instead, *Making Noise* offers a large, amorphous pool of historical evidence that obliquely supports Attali, Hegarty and Kahn (who is often cited). In fact there is little sense of structure beyond this — it’s difficult, for example, to determine the thematic separation between the three parts “Round One: Everywhere,” “Round Two: Everywhen, Everyone” and “Round Three: Everyhow”, or even the reason for their titles. And, just before a brief return to one of the opening themes — noise as a topic in children’s literature, which captivated Schwartz as a child — the book’s final thoughts amount to further generalisations, still just as entranced by paradox and slipperiness as many of noise’s previous theorists: “Timeless and untimely, noise is the noisiest of concepts, abundantly self-contradictory. Profligate. It compels us at every stage to reorganize, take our lives up a notch; or it does us in, deafening us to our relations, obligations. Noise must be what we were waiting for all along, an encounter with the chaotic that loosens the lug-nuts of routine. Or, grating and incessant, it sends us over the edge. Sound and unsound, something or *other*.”

Neither is critique really in Schwartz’s toolbox. Other writers and theorists are simply springboards for the historical facts that fly through the air, with little critical awareness of historiography framing the project (repeatedly, Schwartz is content to describe his endeavour as locating “the history of noise”). Sequences

on, for example, witches or colonial encounters ache for a quantum of feminist or post-colonial theory respectively. Along with its historical sprawl, the lack of criticality is another reason why it’s difficult to imagine the academic researcher who will benefit significantly from *Making Noise*, barring a chance encounter with a handful of pages on their subject via the index. Rather, the book seems apt to charm the general reader with its surprising constellations and charismatic (if sometimes irritating) language play. If, as the opening pages state, the book is “meant to be read aloud”, it could be in the voice of Stephen Fry as host of the British quiz show based on esoteric general knowledge, *QI* (‘Quite Interesting’) — *Making Noise* could well be an extended episode of the show in another form. Or it could be a film by Peter Greenaway, weaving together multifarious moments of canonical history and culture with the experience of trauma and inviting us to ponder the postmodern pattern recognition.

Although Schwartz well knows the distinction between sound and noise, *Making Noise* is not closely focussed on the latter over the former, and frequently strays from sounds entirely. This is a shame because, as Schwartz keeps pointing out, noise is already a slippery subject. Yet it doesn’t have to be written about as elusive, demonic and practically ubiquitous. Schwartz passes through information theory towards *Making Noise*’s end, which has always given one of the clearest accounts of the concept as part of the dialectics of communication. Noise is not anti-Enlightenment but a perfectly locatable aspect of ontology, epistemology and aesthetics, and it is high time to discard the paradoxes and mystifications surrounding it and communicate something new.

Adam Harper