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Everything Plus the Kitchen Sink: An Introduction to Noise in Contemporary Art and Music

Mary Mazurek, PhD

University of Lethbridge

4401 University Drive W

Lethbridge, AB T1K 3M4, Canada

Correspondence should be addressed to Author (mary.mazurek@uleth.ca)

ABSTRACT

Disruptive, disturbing, and dangerous are all adjectives that are commonly attributed to noise. This may be because the experience of noise is likely to trigger the auditory startle response, which in turn propels one out of harm's way. For those who are unable to consider noise beyond its negative connotations, it remains a threat. However, there is a growing number of artists and composers who choose to consider noise differently and use it as an aesthetic material. With unconventional methods, instruments, and applications, these creatives liberate noise from its habitually perceived confines and transduce it into aesthetic material that can be used to challenge power structures, call attention to injustices, encourage collaboration, and is even transformed into means of spiritual and artistic expansion. In this writing, I will highlight artists and composers such as Luigi Russolo, John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and others who use noise aesthetically.

1. INTRODUCTION

Disruptive, disturbing, and dangerous are all adjectives associated with the word noise. Our disdain for noise is logical because loud and sudden sounds often signal dangers and are apt to trigger the auditory startle response to propel us out of harm's way. Furthermore, prolonged exposure may cause hearing damage as well as several other health conditions such as high blood pressure, sleep disturbances, and stress [1]. Considering this, it is reasonable to assume that one should avoid noise whenever possible. However, several artists and composers have chosen to think about and use noise differently. John Cage once

famously said, "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" [2]. Instead of being disturbed by noise, many artists and composers chose to be fascinated by it. They include not only Cage but other influential noisemakers such as Luigi Russolo, Pauline Oliveros, Merzbow, Alison Knowles, Alyce Santoro, and others. Their usage of noise as an aesthetic material serves to challenge power structures, calls out injustices, provides new manners in which to collaborate, and in some cases, noise even becomes contemplative. These artists amplify the creative possibilities of noise by

transducing it from the negative realm into an extended artistic palette. This writing is intended to recognize some of these artists and to reveal through phenomenological methods the complexities that noise conveys in their works. However, art and noise composition can be quite difficult to define, so I have utilized the following classifications to elucidate noise in this context. They are collage/montage, performance, noise-music, material/sculptural noise, and noise apps

In 1989, composer Pauline Oliveros descended into the 2-million-gallon Dan Harpole cistern beneath the grounds of the Fort Worden State Park with trombonist Stuart Dempster and sound artist Panaiotis with the goal of some noisy improvisation with the cistern's 45-second reverb time [3]. *Deep Listening* was necessary to interact and collaborate in this space.

Oliveros developed the practice of *Deep Listening* after observing musicians who could expertly execute the formal elements of a score but were not really listening [4]. She documented her initial process in the following passage, "I began with myself. I started to sing and play long tones, and to listen and observe how these tones affected me mentally and physically. I noticed that I could change my emotional state by concentrating my attention on a tone. I noticed that I could feel my body responding with relaxation or tension. Prolonged practice brought about a heightened state of awareness that gave me a sense of well-being" [5].

It was with this instance that *Deep Listening* became an intentional contemplative practice. In the cistern, *Deep Listening* became a collaboration between Oliveros, Dempster, Panaiotis, and the 45-second reverberation of the cistern.

However, noise in western artistic practice began before Oliveros. Noise was brewing with the technological advances of the industrial revolution in the early 1900s, and this inspired Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo to expand his compositional palette with noise. Capitalizing on the research of Helmholtz, Russolo constructed 27 resonators to form his noise instruments, which were called *intonarumori*. They were acoustic, mechanical devices fitted with cranks, gears, levers, vibrating strings, and conical horns. The instruments were named according to the sounds that they produced. They included the howler, the roarer, the crackler, the hummer, the gurgler, the whistler, etc. The Burster (Scoppiatore), for example, was meant to sound like an automobile engine and was said to have

produced ten whole tones with microtonal capabilities [6]. Because of his noisy musical inventions, Barclay Brown credits Russolo with creating one of the first musical synthesizers [7].

Additionally, he penned a noise manifesto entitled *The Art of Noises*. Here, Russolo describes the need to move beyond western tonality and into the noise realm. His rationale was not only to expand the definition of music but also to use noise to elevate mankind spiritually. He seemed to have achieved this goal with a reporter from the London *Pall Mall Gazette* who enthusiastically reviewed Russolo's *intonarumori* composition *Awakening of a City*, which was presented in the intimate setting of the home of Futurist founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti [8]. However, when this piece was presented at the Teatro Dal Verme in 1914, it must have upset the conservatory professors' musical sensibilities, and the result was riotous [9]. However, with this concert, Russolo challenged the power structures that proclaimed which materials were suitable for the concert hall. Though Russolo seemed to have lost that fight, he may have won the war as he inspired countless artists ranging from John Cage to Sonic Youth.

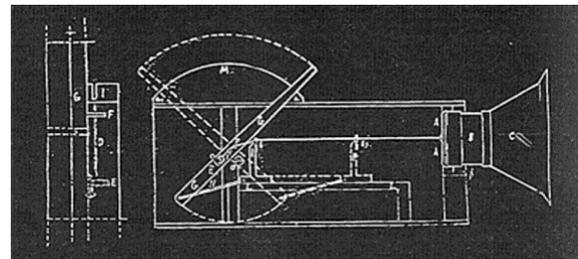


Figure 1. Russolo's 1914 *Intonarumori* Sketch, Wikimedia Commons

A cistern is not a kitchen sink, and neither is a noise intoner, but they demonstrate that nothing is off-limits when it comes to the application of noise in art and music. These works can be difficult to categorize, as they transgress traditional boundaries that change with the ever-evolving technical landscape. This challenges us to reconsider what we thought we already knew about art and music. Composer and researcher Gary Kendall explains the impact of this on the psyche. "Electroacoustic music, sonic arts, in fact all of the arts intend to produce a result, often a new sense of possibilities, even if that sense is ineffable – ineffable because the integration of new experiences becomes

an unobservable part of the listener's cognitive unconscious, a change in the cognitive-perceptual capacities of the listener. And while we all undergo changes in the course of our everyday life (welcomed or not), we invite to ourselves the changes that art fosters in us" [10].

Kendall relates that when one is exposed to new technologies through art, one becomes more receptive to them. However, tolerance is developed, and this pushes the noise boundary further. More noise is needed. This allows artists and composers to reveal more complex meaning and feelings through noise.

Another foundational figure in the usage of aesthetic noise was John Cage. He became tired with the confines of serialist music and sought to change the musical definition to organized sound [11]. From then on, the noise of iron pipes, meeting bathtubs, blenders, nuts, bolts, screws, and other everyday objects would be some of his compositional tools. Cage viewed everything as relational, deeming that there was no separation between art, life, and technology [12]. Because of this, Cage championed not only everyday objects in art making but also the new technology of the day, the tape recorder. For Cage, it was not just a storage medium but a compositional tool, as witnessed in pieces such as *Water Walk* [13]. Also, because he believed in the relational nature of everything, collaboration became an organic progression, and he willingly collaborated with musicians, dancers, choreographers, and visual artists. This made noise more accessible.

Beginning with these foundational figures provides some insight into noise as an aesthetic material. However, noise-based art can be challenging to classify, so as stated earlier, some categorization may prove useful in gaining a better understanding of noise in art and music. Again, they are collage/montage, performance, material/sculptural noise, noise-music, and noise applications.

2. COLLAGE/MONTAGE

According to the Tate, "Collage describes both the technique and the resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface" [14]. This only describes the visual mediums, and montage generally refers to film, but the form is time-based so that it could be applied to noise works as well.

Collage in sound composition likely began with

musique concrète, a term coined by Pierre Schaefer in 1948. As Paul Hegarty explains in *Noise Music a History*, "Schaeffer imagined a new form of music where research and art would combine, with the quasi-scientific research leading to an artistic outcome" [15]. Schaeffer conducted his experiments by cutting and splicing recording tape with prerecorded sounds. As an engineer at the Radio diffusion Française, he had access to a vast library of sound effects. This genre of noise composition is demonstrated in "Etude aux chemins de fer," *Schaeffer* manipulates the chugging, clacking, squeaking, and banging of recorded train sounds. The rhythmic patterns are created by cutting and splicing the recording tape [16]. With *musique concrète*, Schaeffer subverted the radio technology of the time to create this compositional practice, which utilized recorded and manipulated noise and tape splicing.

Building on the idea of tape splicing, Canadian composer John Oswald expanded the practice of sonic collage using digital sampling technology to develop what he terms Plunderphonics. Oswald coined the term in his 1985 essay "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative," which notes the lack of citation in appropriating music that is present in literature [17]. In a later interview, Oswald explains, "The definition I'd set up for plunderphonics was music that was recognisable in some way, and the transformation of that music. I think the most successful examples use music that is the most recognizable [18]. One of his most well-known examples is DAB, a reworking of Michael Jackson's *Bad*. The full album includes not only cut-ups of Jackson but of Beethoven, Stravinsky, the Beatles, Dolly Parton, and other recognizable works, which Oswald meticulously documented in the liner notes.

Oswald's goal was never monetary, as the album was never intended to be sold. It was given freely to radio stations, libraries, and anyone else who asked. Oswald felt that this was permissible as this seemed to fall under the fair dealings act of the copyright laws, but CIPO, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office, saw it differently. Oswald received a cease and desist letter forcing him to destroy any remaining copies. However, the order did not include previously distributed CDs, so the album was never eliminated because digital copies are easily reproduced. It continues to be distributed through underground channels elevating it to cult status. Oswald's DAB became a commentary on appropriation and fair usage. CIPO could not stop the album's distribution as it is

accessible to anyone capable of googling it.

3. PERFORMANCE

The next area that I would like to define is performance. Performance art is like theater, but it is not theater. As art historian Roselee Goldberg explains, “The history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public” [19]. This form can not only contain noise but also be considered a noisy genre as it includes many indeterminate artistic elements.

During my MFA work at Columbia College, Chicago, my classmates and I had the pleasure of working with Fluxus founding artist Alison Knowles. The Fluxus movement originated from an experimental music class taught by John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York in the late 1950s. Knowles as a member of this group produced several Event Scores. As a scholar and daughter of Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, Hanna Higgins notes, “The most durable innovation to emerge from that classroom [John Cage’s Classroom] was George Brecht’s Event score, a performance technique that has been used extensively by virtually every Fluxus artist with varying degrees of success. In the Event, everyday actions are framed as minimalistic performances or, occasionally, as imaginary and impossible experiments with everyday situations” [20].



Image 2: *Nivea Cream Piece* (1962) by Alison Knowles

Photo by Jeff Abel

Throughout Knowles’ two-day residency, we gave a public performance enacting several of her event scores, including her *Nivea Cream Piece*, performed by my classmates Kelly Parsell, Erin Cramer, and Kristina Gosh. Knowles’ score reads, “First performer comes on stage with a jar of Nivea cream. The performers massage their hands in front of a microphone. The other performers enter one at a time. They make a mass of messaging hands and leave one at a time following the first performer” [21]. This is an example of an ordinary activity made extraordinary through amplification, which brings one to presence as the nuances of the noise are noticed.

Amplification alters perception by allowing the listeners to hear details they otherwise might not. Noise amplification as well as manipulation is also demonstrated in the performances of New York-based artist Lesley Flanigan. In her 2009 album *Amplifications* [22], she creates sounds that could not exist without amplification. Flanigan amplifies her voice and uses effects processors and custom-built speaker and microphone combinations. The effects processors allow her to create real-time loops, which she uses to harmonize with herself. The sound is then projected through custom-made speakers and further manipulated with the feedback that she creates when either a handheld or contact microphone is depressed against the speakers. She plays the feedback like an instrument to accompany her vocal loops. Flanigan’s performance, much like noise, does not respect boundaries as it blurs the lines between noise, art, and music.

4. NOISE-MUSIC

It is not uncommon for noise to appear in music. Just think of the guitar player who turns their amplifier up to the proverbial 11 and distorts the tubes. Distortion noise has become a common textural component in many genres of music like rock and metal. However, the proceedings will focus on noisier examples.

The noisy and confrontational style of noise-music continues in the collaboration between Japanese noise-artist Merzbow and Alessandro Cortini, formerly of the band Nine Inch Nails. The album is saturated with harsh static, revving, and scraping noises with the addition of oscillator sweeps [23]. I listen with intrigue, but my dog flees the room. Even though

Merzbow is a vegan and lover of animals, this does not convince him to stay, and he scurries off to the safety of a quieter room.



Image 3: Merzbow in Chicago 2018, photo by Mary Mazurek

Merzbow is considered to be the “godfather” of Japanese noise-music, and harshness, intensity, and his noisy confrontational style characterize his compositions. He takes his name Merzbow from the Dada artist Kurt Schwitters’ work *Merzbau*. The work describes a house that is so full of material that its meaning becomes lost. Merzbow’s music is so full of noise that it also loses its meaning as music. Despite the nearly unbearable noise, Merzbow has released over 200 albums as a soloist and collaborator, all of which are vastly different. For example, I would describe his earsplitting 1996 release *Pulse Demon* as being crushed by a wall of noise [24]. In comparison, the 2017 Cortini/Merzbow collaboration is still noisy but seems much more musical than his other releases. This demonstrates that noise can be a collaborative medium.

The following example Industrial Music is characterized by the inclusion of electronic samples, reproduced at incorrect speeds, cutting and splicing of recorded sounds, shrill vocals, and harsh and aggressively played instruments at earsplitting volumes. The genre originates from Throbbing Gristle’s 1977 release *Second Annual Report* on Industrial Records. The group’s motto is, “Industrial Music for Industrial People,” which speaks to both the social and the economic realities of the day.

Their 1979 release *20 Jazz Funk Greats* also confronts the ironies of reality with a deceptive album cover. The photograph shows the band standing in a grassy

meadow. In viewing this cover art, one might conclude that this is an easy-listening album, but they would be mistaken. The musical contents are loud and noisy, and the lyrics allude to the themes of power and control [25]. An additional irony is that this lush meadow on the cover is the notorious Beachy Head, better known as suicide point. This juxtaposition is an example of the power of noise as social commentary as it elucidates the realities faced by a depressed community.

Though Throbbing Gristle’s album was noisy, it does not compare to a live performance of the drone metal band Sunn O))) . Theorist Dr. Norberto Gomez describes his first live experience with the band as sublime, expansive, and mindful. He concludes by saying, “What struck me most was the state of consciousness raised by the event, which invoked attention and awakening” [26].

In the realm of Metal, Sunn O)))’s *Kannon* is especially noisy yet oddly hypnotic [27]. Deviating from the typical rules of heavy metal, Sunn O))) does not include speed, driving rhythms, or percussion. However, they replace this with powerful and slow-moving chord progressions. Listening to noise in this manner becomes a contemplative experience. Sunn O)))’s Greg Anderson and Stephen O’Malley are considered to be the pioneers of this sub-genre of metal known as drone. They produce a sound so loud and thick that it can be felt. This should not be surprising, because sound is material.



Figure 4: Sunn O))) Live in Chicago 2018, Photo by Mary Mazurek

5. MATERIAL/SCULPTURAL NOISE

Acoustics is the study of sound as a physical material, which would then classify noise as material. The artist Alyce Santoro brings a sculptural element to noise. Her ongoing project entitled SONIC FABRIC takes recorded cassette tape woven into fabric and fashions them into sculptural pieces. One of the pieces that she constructed with this fabric was fashioned into a twenty-one-foot sail entitled *Tell-Tail Sail (After Sandy)*.



Figure 5: *Tell-Tail Sail (After Sandy)*, photo by Mary Mazurek

The tapes contained recorded sounds of New York. I had the opportunity to view the piece in person at the Gasser-Grunert Gallery after its restoration post-Hurricane Sandy. The fabric of the sail produces noise when a modified Walkman is passed over it [28]. This creates a visual and tactile and sonic landscape as well as a performative one. Santoro also constructs clothing out of the fabric, which exemplifies its performative quality. The noise encased in this fabric can then be liberated in performance with a modified Sony Walkman, just as Phish drummer Jon Fishman did in concert with his commissioned *Rhythm Dress* [29].

6. NOISE APPS

An example of a noise app is the 4'33" app for iPhone created by the John Cage Trust [30]. It allows users to recreate John Cage's "silent piece." It records the residual noise in the attempt to be silent. Additionally, one can gain auditory knowledge of spaces from nearly every country on earth through this app. This

iPhone app and the noise that it gathers end up connecting us in community through noise.

7. CONCLUSION

Noise in western art seems to begin with Luigi Russolo and the creation of his noise instruments called *intonarumori*. Russolo's work then influences John Cage. He uses both everyday noise and technology to demonstrate the integration of noise, art, music, and technology, just as Russolo did in his day. As seminal figures in western noise, they continue to influence creators even today. Noise artists and composers experiment with the ever-evolving technology, and this expands the noise palette. In the hands of an artist, noise is capable of communicating complex concepts by providing additional forms of expression for the artist and new experiences for the audience.

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