

A Century of Noise: Machines, Music and the Democratization of Composition

Project: Understand, analyze and theorize the role of machines, as instruments, in the musical process and on our conception of musicality; to examine the political economy of who is labeled a musician and a composer; speculate on the effect of pluralizing sophisticated musical production

Thesis: Machines democratize the process of composition – provided that we let go of the conventions and hierarchies associated with the term, as well as definitions of musicality, taste, and benefit; Essentially machines force us to jettison long-held metaphysics of music

Just over a century ago the first Futurist Manifesto appeared. Written by iconoclast poet and impresario Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, it extolled masculine aggression and the wonders of the second industrial age: speed, freedom, danger, warfare, mechanization, and energy. Marinetti proceeded to assemble an equally experimental and rebellious group of young men looking to redefine Italian culture through a politics of refusal, destruction, rejection and regeneration. Among the composers, artists and writers was a young painter named Luigi Russolo, whose 1913 treatise 'The Art of Noises' would become the seminal document of musical futurism. Half prescriptive analysis, half call to arms, 'The Art of Noises' heralded a new idea that would, a century later, come to define popular music: the notion of building unique but familiar machines to make new music. In just over a century – Russolo's ideas of man's relationship to the machine and its ability to democratize composition have come closer to being a reality than ever before thanks to the computer.

Marinetti, Russolo and fellow musical futurists Francesco Pratella and (to a lesser extent) Ferruccio Busoni, were unapologetically about the new. Pratella begins his 1910 'Manifesto to Futurist Musicians' with the words "I speak to the young. Only they should listen, and only they can understand what I have to say." Pratella goes on to attack any relationship to older music – likening it to a corpse

and referring to playing old master as 'exhumation'. In the wake of a performance of futurist composers in Rome, Russolo refers to Futurist music as 'The Art of Noises', and deems it to be the logical consequence of musical innovation, part of inevitable forward progress. For him, noise was the sound of both the present and the future, and antithetical to both the ancient past (which is any reference to neo-classicism) or to the artifice embodied in pastorals and heroic ideals of 19th century Romanticism.

In manifestos between 1910 and 1913, Russolo and Pratella call for genuinely new approaches to composition. They reject the academy and musical institutions that require or aspire to monetary exchange, decry criticism that relies on moral metaphysics, and discard regularity, predictability and pre-established systems of composition and aesthetics. Russolo also offers a pragmatic explanation – the music of the previous generations simply does not pique the emotions, feed the spirit, or challenge the mind as it used to. 19th century music is no longer fresh, therefore its utility has passed. Modern man needs equally modern music, sounds that speak to his industrial soul, communicate modern life and no longer confess the ethereal and immortal, but shouts about the here and now.

Among the aspects of traditional music culture that Russolo rejected were the musical instruments themselves. These instruments – some in common use for several centuries – had descended into repetition and banality, their sounds tired and palettes bland. Creating a new musical reality required fresh sounds, vibrations beyond what is possible for traditional instruments. Music that brings moderns to emotional heights necessitates noises that are uncomfortable and displeasing, rhythms that are uneven and abrupt, and musical subjects that reflect the experience of a new century, not the ideals of the past. To these ends Russolo built his own machines, *intonarumori*, systematically designed to mimic the sounds of industrialized Italy, where machines rumbled into life at sunrise and churned late into the evening.

Unlike our nostalgic and contradictory modern conception of life tethered to the machine an abomination, Russolo idealized the intertwining of man and machine. For him, this was advancement,

liberation, and the unleashing of potential that had been limited by the weaknesses of body and material. Industrial revolution was unleashing new ontologies, untethered by the past, and Futurism aimed at breaking the remaining constraints of polite society to make it anew in the tantalizing mode of industrial power. For Russolo and the Futurists, the machine, was the tool to perform such indelicate surgeries – a chisel to sculpt pure freedom from the reified forms of past. Its ontology was noise – the sound and essence of modernity – an idea that finds strange and oppositional resonances with anti-democratic thinkers in the early days of an independent US, racist ideologues, and political economists.

Buried within Russolo and Pratella's musical ideologies is also a deep critique of composition itself. Pratella was vehemently anti-conservatory, calling into question anything having to do with markets, formalization, system (although he designed one himself), criticism, or any variety of comparison to the 'Great Masters' of the past. Russolo believed in the democratization of the composition – that training the ears to capture the essences, forms and structures of what we refer to as common practice music was no long appropriate to creating new and meaningful music for the modern audience. His solution was simple and holistic: open up the ears to systematically and attentively listen; create from the raw materials of modernity, both its sounds and its unconventional sound producers. His vision of young composers consisted of a burgeoning young middle class of machinists who drew inspiration from the tools of their work. They created, consumed and re-imagined noise in order to compose with it, and built new machines to produce and process their compositions. Russolo's imaginary modern composers would then bring their music to the masses, turning the factory floor into a symphony, a pleasure embedded in labor that Herbert Marcuse would later philosophize in *Eros and Civilization* as the maximization of pleasure and the aestheticization of labor.

This idea of the democratizing of composition is perhaps most famously, or infamously, picked up by philosopher of political economy Jacques Attali in *Noise*. In it, Attali forwards a human and

perceptive definition of noise: it is simply sound that we have no definition for or understanding of; and that noise becomes music when we comprehend its constituent parts and organization. He theorizes that the future of social organization occurs first in musical organization and that by studying music history, we are shown an alternate history of Western civilization. He concludes by advocating for a utopia of mass composition – that by having more composers, democracy will be strengthened, as more voices will be involved in the process of writing – and therefore creating – the future. Whether or not you believe Attali's utopianism, share his confidence in music, or despise his complete disregard for musical technique, literacy and competence, Attali offers a tempting point of departure and resonance with other thinkers.

The idea of noise is tied, in the US, to the early colonies where the American aristocracy fretted about including the rabble in the voting roles. The non-elite were often characterized – as with so many other immigrant groups in North America and Europe – as being noisy, among other undesirable attributes. Where the founding fathers are obliquely right is that democracy is inevitably noisy – a plurality of opinions and positions, of voices and languages, of demands and desires, is noisy in both the literal and metaphorical sense. The idea of a clear signal/noise differentiation is lost in dismantling hierarchies of what matters and what does not; who can speak and who cannot; and what can be said. The dialectic of strength and danger implicit in Democracy – there is strength in plurality, but the constant peril of partisanship and impasse is always present – has been noted many, from Dewey and Habermas to media theorist Neil Postman, who meticulously deconstructs the idea of an informed public and public opinion in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In a democracy we are entitled to an opinion, but that does not guarantee that it is always well-crafted, informed, applicable and relevant. He asks if every voice deserves an audience, and if there should there be a mutually understood public standard for participation? For Postman, the noise of democracy, while holding potential, is also hazardous.

Returning to Attali and Russolo – one should ask: Do the aesthetics of noise as a compositional device allow for a widened circle of potential composers? Does the noise of plurality help to compose a meaningful future? Where do Democratic noise and musical noise intersect? Are listening to and composing with noise liberating acts? If we combine theories of noise, democracy and machines, we arrive at a rather compelling question – Do noise machines usher us to new musical and social futures, as Russolo and Attali might have it, or submerge us in a stew of auditory sludge and false consciousness, as Neil Postman might argue.

HERE IS WHERE I WANT TO ACTUALLY SKIP THE CENTURY OF NOISE – Mechanical orchestras, player pianos, musique concrete, electro-acoustic and radio music, sampling, DJ culture etc. – AND SKIP TO THE PRESENT

In our present millennial epoch, it seems as though Russolo and Pratella are having their day, although not as either might have imagined it. As technology expanded and de-industrialization hit, factory floors have either emptied out, many sent well outside of earshot, or have become sleek, clean, and substantially quieter than in Russolo's day. More than that, modern man has taken to personal listening to alleviate the various auditory strains placed on his ears by modern machines – cars, trains, office babble and unwanted conversations. The machines that fill us with joy and transform our everyday experience into a symphony, that aestheticize our travels and labors with the same soundtrack that accompanies our leisure, are private and, if not expensive, certainly not free.

However, they were correct about machines making music, expanding the sonic palette, and ultimately democratizing composition. The same machines that we use to labor – computers, tablets, and smart phones – are being used to produce musics which were unimaginable when composition was limited to the stable of instruments found in the concert hall and salon, and the techniques of common practice music. The computer has allowed for composition – Sibelius and Finale, digital recording and manipulation, mixing and mastering, sampling, chopping and screwing – to be accessed on a previously unprecedented scale. Computers are the futurist machines that Russolo dreamed of – our mechanical

companion species that produces sound to pique the emotions and bring the soul to unfathomed heights. They are cheaper than a violin, guitar, or flute, are more available, require far less instruction than conventional instruments, and allow for composition without the burdens of traditional musical literacy. They have, in effect, done the cultural work that Futurists envisioned by both bringing the act of music making to the masses via an everyday device, and by eroding and altering the structures and hierarchies of music making, mostly outside of pre-existing cultural institutions (sometimes creating new cultural institutions – Google and Apple).

They also tell us something vital about our democracy – who does not have a voice. The argument that the computer is democratizing assumes a particular level of access: access to the money to purchase one, reliable electricity, the safety of personal property, and in most cases, access to the internet. These are not shared by all and are mainly concentrated in privileged sectors of the population. When examining a musical landscape, perhaps the availability and prevalence of computer music (composed, performed or reproduced by computer) informs us of both the widening of democracy, but also, by their absence, those whose voices are not yet part of the larger discussion, who are still silenced and denied access. While the act of composition is empowering, we should also take Attali's argument in the negative, and instead of listening to noise, tune out ears to those the silences in our midst and continue to ask – whose noise do we not hear?