

Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History*, New York: Continuum, 2007.

Review

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There is probably little doubt now that the proliferation of noise was the most significant problematic of twentieth century aural culture. During a century that witnessed regular rejections and reconceptualisations of every parameter of music – from harmony, melody and rhythm to music’s production, reproduction and relation to place – the question of how noise is apprehended established itself by necessity as the ground common to all other considerations. This at least must be true if music is understood to operate within a normative framework established by its history in such a way that any real innovation ruptures or exceeds that framework, passing over and beyond it into an unknown field of possibilities. Under such a model, any real innovation is destined to start life as temporarily inassimilable noise.

This, then, is the first reason why Paul Hegarty’s *Noise/Music: A History* promises so much to our understanding of twentieth century aural cultures: without a theoretically astute, historical understanding of music’s two-step with noise, much of recent music history simply cannot be broached.

The second reason is Hegarty’s extraordinary range of reference to different musics, including (though not at all limited to) Russolo, Satie and Ives at one end of the century, through experimental music, *musique concrète*, Fluxus, free jazz, prog rock, Krautrock, punk and industrial music, and Merzbow and the sound installations of Janet Cardiff at the other end. Inevitably, certain absences stand out: none of the members of the Sonic Arts Union receive mention, Helmut Lachenmann is nowhere to be found and the many noises of feminism pass entirely unheard. Yet even despite these omissions, the way Hegarty brings figures of different generations, aesthetic persuasions and markets (high-brow, popular or entirely obscure) into dialogue is laudable. Given the increased accessibility (in the developed world at least) of all kinds of music, promoted by technological reproduction and the internet, and the fog of influence this has engendered, this is probably the only realistic way to narrate recent music history – despite the continued dominance in music publishing of isolationist approaches defined by genre or assumed market.

Hegarty’s conception of noise is lathered up from Jacques Attali’s familiar argument that the designation ‘noise’ involves a cultural judgment on what is senseless or unmusical. Noise implies negativity and resistance and is received as an imposition. It is not to be mistaken for simple ‘noises’, neutral vibrations that exist for themselves oblivious to the psychology of perception. Rather, Hegarty tends to locate noise in the short-circuiting between noises and norms: it provokes something akin to a failure of hearing, and this can put noise in a position of sadistic mastery and subjection over listeners (4; 124).

The hearing of failure and the failure of hearing: this is the conceptual pair undergirding Hegarty’s most interesting historical material, from his discussion of the ossified leftovers of semi-standardised jazz practices in Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1960) (46) to the excessive self-differentiating of Akita Masami’s Merzbow project. In fact a plethora of binary pairings, coupled with a zealous deconstructive impulse, mark Hegarty’s project, which is saturated with references to a vast brigade of

continental philosophers from Kant to Agamben and particularly to Bataille, Adorno, Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze. The episodic, dialectical spirals that ensue from this heterogeneous pack of thinkers can be both exhilarating and frustrating but unfortunately do not always hit their mark. The continued emphasis on transgressing genre norms in contemporary music, where multiplicity is generally the rule, seems unwarranted. The worst example of this is Hegarty's extensive discussion of Merzbow's *Bloody Sea* (Vivo, 2006), in which he conjures a conundrum from the fact that the album's packaging suggests an anti-whaling theme that he nowhere discerns in the music ('I think the listener is being asked to listen for content... but the sound resists', 164). After a digression through new age 'whale music', which *Bloody Sea* obviously isn't, and a meditation on the sea as a zone of noise (incomprehension, pollution, colonialism) for humans, the paragraph and chapter simply cut out mid-sentence in my copy of the book (the first paperback edition). Merely a coincidental editorial oversight from Continuum?

The constant citation also often distracts from Hegarty's own arguments. While addressing *musique concrète*, for example, Hegarty's critique suddenly finds itself in the voice of a ventriloquised Adorno. Then, while *musique concrète* lies abandoned, the critique reverses into an attack on Adorno's conservatism regarding developments in music technology (a due critique, granted). Underneath this theatre of critique is the rather banal claim, supported by statements from Schaeffer and François Bayle but no substantiating music analysis, that *musique concrète* is little more than an effort to tame and assimilate noises into music, belonging to the domain of noise reduction (34).

Let's investigate this claim briefly. Hegarty situates it in relation to a discussion of Schaeffer's theory of acousmatic listening which stresses the defamiliarisation of sounds from their sources (33). There are clearly at least two displacements at play: firstly, the phonographical distillation of sounds from the discursive regime in which they are meaningful and, secondly, their insertion into a musical context previously foreign to them. The effect tends toward the surrealistic: many of the sounds of *musique concrète* are immediately recognisable in the absence of their sources and evoke snatches of narrative (Luc Ferrari among others would draw out this aspect) which are then instantly contradicted by the flow of the musical montage, reminiscent in effect of the surrealists' *cadavre exquis* games. Narrative impulse and musical structuring jostle irreconcilably with their two attendant modes of listening. There is no question of one being assimilated into the other though; instead we might ask if a third mode of listening arises from the montage in which the sensuality of sounds is experienced at a remove from both discursive and musical purposivity.

Given that Hegarty defines noise as a cultural judgment, such questions addressing its listenability are crucial to his project. He squarely approaches the problem only in the final pages, via Jean-Luc Nancy's recent musings on philosophy and listening (*Listening*, trans. C. Mandell, New York: Fordham U.P., 2007) and several quotations from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Nancy asks if philosophy might be able to listen beyond the system of signifying references that encode what is heard as what is to be understood. Hegarty derogates such a listening approach as a 'newly positive passivity of receptiveness' (199), arguing that Heidegger's account of listening is in fact more sophisticated because it incorporates an account of refusal and rejection as well as openness. Quoting Heidegger, Hegarty notes that listening as a mode of

‘Being-with’ could involve ‘following, going along with, and the privative modes of not-hearing, resisting, defying, and turning away’ (196). Hegarty concludes:

What noise needs, and where noise is, however briefly, is a listening that is brought back to hearing through processes of rejection (as noise), confusion (through noise as change), excess (including of volume), wrongness or inappropriateness, failure (of noise, to be noise, to not be noise, to be music, not be sound, not be). Noise is where all this listening goes when it has had enough. (199)

The problem here is that the original Heidegger quote is twisted out of a discussion of Dasein’s receptiveness to discourse and language. Contrary to what Hegarty suggests, the relevant passage from *Being and Time* clearly indicates a priority of hearing based on understanding (through language) over any kind of listening that tries to anchor itself to sensation. Indeed Heidegger even clarifies this priority through the example of hearing ‘pure noise’, an example which, startlingly, Hegarty somehow neglects to cite.

It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to “hear” a “pure noise”. The fact that motor-cycles and waggons are what we proximally hear is the phenomenal evidence that in every case Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells *alongside* what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly does not dwell proximally alongside “sensations”; nor would it first have to give shape to the swirl of sensations to provide the springboard from which the subject leaps off and finally arrives at a “world”. (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, New York: Harper Perennial, 1962, 207.)

According to Heidegger, it is because ‘Dasein has language’, because language is rooted in its fundamental ontology, that it hears transportation vehicles before sonic rumblings. When Heidegger speaks of privative modes of not-hearing, he is clearly referring to a refusal of meaning articulated through and within speech and language, or in broader terms: discourse – not to a rejecting-listening to ‘pure noise’. In other words he is speaking about precisely what Nancy hoped to move beyond: hearing as understanding based on pre-existing norms. How do we listen to noise then? The question still stands, but it seems that if a normative, accepting-rejecting mode of listening and a listening that in some way involves an opening of perception toward the multiplicity of sensation are to be distinguished, their superimposition needs to be better accounted for. What in normative listening allows multiplicity to be approached? With what power can the multiple become entrusted to replot the line between acceptance and rejection? If the dialectical funnels burrowed out by Hegarty – expectation and rejection, the expectation of rejection and the rejection of expectation, and so on *ad infinitum* – are not porous to the multiple, then there can be no listening to noise (and it could have no history).

Hegarty’s *Noise/Music* will and should be widely read and offers much to be emulated. Its theoretical armature is highly complex and regularly supports brilliant analyses coupled with far-reaching critiques of many orthodox accounts of recent music history. Yet it by no means gets to the bottom of many of the important

questions rubbed against in its pages. It will certainly not be the last we hear of twentieth century noise.