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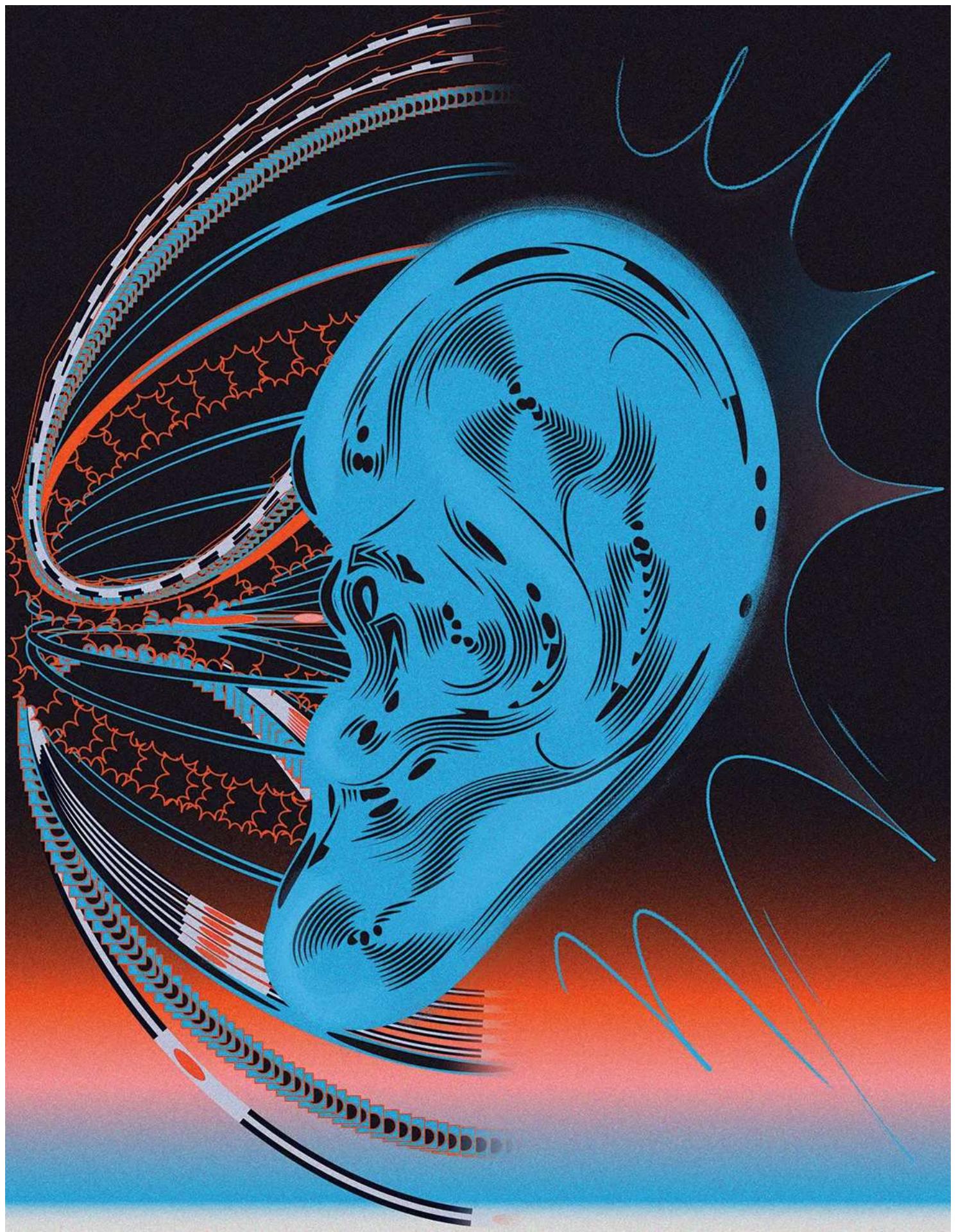
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What Is Noise?

Alex Ross
31–39 minutes

Sometimes we embrace it, sometimes we hate it—and everything depends on who is making it.

April 15, 2024



Noise has come to mean an engulfing barrage of data—less an event than a condition. Illustration by Petra Péterffy

"Noise" is a fuzzy word—a noisy one, in the statistical sense. Its meanings run the gamut from the negative to the positive, from the overpowering to the mysterious, from anarchy to sublimity. The negative seems to lie at the root: etymologists trace the word to "nuisance" and "nausea." Noise is what drives us mad; it sends the Grinch over the edge at Christmastime. ("Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise!") Noise is the sound of madness itself, the din within our minds. The demented narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" jabbers about noise while he hallucinates his victim's heartbeat: "I found that the noise was *not* within my ears. . . . The noise steadily increased. . . . The noise steadily increased."

Yet noise can be righteous and majestic. The Psalms are full of joyful noise, noise unto the Lord. In the Book of Ezekiel, the voice of God is said to be "like a noise of many waters." In "Paradise Lost," Heaven makes "infernal noise" as it beats back the armies of Hell. Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" marshals forces for a different kind of battle. At the same time, the word can summon all manner of gentler murmurs: "The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs." Tennyson speaks of a "noise of hymns," Coleridge of a "noise like of a hidden brook." In Elizabethan England, a "noyse" could be a musical ensemble, such as the one that supplied a "heavenly melodie" for Queen Elizabeth I's coronation pageant. Any hope of limiting the scope of the term evaporated when information theorists detached it from acoustics altogether and applied it to any ambient activity that hinders a signal. Noise has come to mean an engulfing barrage of data—less an event than a condition.

Other languages handle noise a bit less vaguely. In French, the most common term is *bruit*, which comes from the Latin for "roar." That's a straightforward description of what a noise sounds like, as opposed to a subjective assessment of how it might upset us. In German, *Lärm* tends to indicate louder noises, *Geräusch* softer, more natural ones. Russians have a range of words, including *shum*, which, according to Vladimir Nabokov, suggests "more of a swoosh than a racket." When Osip Mandelstam wrote of *shum vremeni*—"the noise of time"—he captured an essential texture of modern life.

Noise is capacious enough to have inspired a small and ever-growing library. Alongside various cultural histories—Bart Kosko's "Noise," David Hendy's "Noise," Mike Goldsmith's "Discord: The Story of Noise," Hillel Schwartz's nine-hundred-page "Making Noise"—you can read accounts of noise-music scenes ("Japanoise," "New York Noise"), noise-based literary criticism ("Shakespeare's Noise," "Kafka and Noise"), and philosophies of noise ("An Epistemology of Noise," "Noise Matters: Toward an Ontology of Noise"), not to mention practical-minded guides to reducing noise from your *hvac* unit or reducing the noise in your head. How noise relates to music is a much bruited topic in itself. Samuel Johnson offers an elegant resolution: "Of all noises, I think music the least disagreeable." Music is our name for the noise that we like.

With a universal definition hovering out of reach, the discourse concerning noise often starts with the personal. My history with the thing is fraught: I hate it and I love it. As a child, I was extraordinarily sensitive to loud sounds. Family expeditions to Fourth of July fireworks displays or steam-railway museums routinely ended with me running in tears to the safety of the car. When, in early adulthood, I moved into the noise cauldron of New York City, I was tormented by neighbors' stereos and by the rumble of the street. I stuffed windows with pillows and insulation; I invested in industrial-strength earplugs; I positioned an oversized window fan next to my bed. This neurosis has subsided, but I remain that maddening hotel guest who switches rooms until he finds one that overlooks an airshaft or an empty lot.

All the while, I was drawn to music that others would pay money to avoid. Having grown up with classical music, I found my way to the refined bedlam of the twentieth-century avant-garde: Edgard Varèse, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti. In college, I hosted a widely unheard radio show on which I broadcast things like Ligeti's "Poème Symphonique"—a piece for a hundred metronomes. When someone called in to report that the station's signal had gone down, I protested that we were, in fact, listening to music. Similar misunderstandings arose when I aired Cage's "Imaginary Landscape No. 4," for twelve radios. When I moved on to so-called popular music, I had ears only for the churning dissonances of Cecil Taylor, AMM, and Sonic Youth. I became the keyboardist in a noise band, which made one proudly chaotic public appearance, in 1991. At one point, my bandmates and I improvised over a tape loop of the minatory opening chords of Richard Strauss's "Die Frau Ohne Schatten."

Obviously, my issues with noise pivot on the question of control. When the noise occurs on my own terms, I enjoy it; when it's imposed on me, I recoil. This bifurcation is typical, even if I represent an extreme case. Garret Keizer, in his incisive 2010 book, "The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise," observes that the noise/music distinction is ultimately an ethical one. If you elect to hear something, it is not noise, even if most people might deem it unspeakably horrible. If you are forced to hear something, it is noise, even if most people might deem it ineffably gorgeous. Thus, Keizer writes, "Lou Reed's 'Metal Machine Music' performed at the Gramercy is not noise; Gregorian Chant piercing my bathroom wall is."

"Unwanted sound" is the basic definition. An act of aggression is implied: someone is exercising power by projecting sound into your space. Sometimes the act is unconscious: people don't realize how loud their speakers are, or they assume that everyone loves their music as much as they do. Sometimes, though, it is a gesture of undisguised brutality. Late one night in 2002, I asked some frat-boyish neighbors to turn down their thumping techno. They responded by turning it up. When I complained again, one of them began shouting "Fucking faggot!" and hurling his body against my door. I lacked the presence of mind to remark upon the irony of homophobes blasting techno—in Chelsea, of all places.

We seldom reject the sounds of people we like. Disputes over noise expose social fissures. The classic cinematic study of music, noise, and violence is Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing," in which Radio Raheem brings his boom box inside Sal's pizzeria, blaring Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." Sal says, "What did I tell you about that noise?" Radio Raheem protests, "This is music. My music." Minutes later, he is dead, the victim of a police killing.





"I bring you I.P."

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein and Eliza Hittman

The perception of hip-hop as "Black Noise"—the title of a 1994 book by the pop-culture scholar Tricia Rose—is part of a long history of sonic dehumanization directed at minority groups. The word "barbarian" originates from a disparaging Greek term, *bárbaros*, which appears to evoke the alleged gibberish of foreign peoples ("bar bar bar"). The musicologist Ruth HaCohen has tracked long-standing European perceptions of Jews as a peculiarly noisy people. "*Lärm wie in einer Judenschule*," or "noise as in a synagogue," remained a popular German expression into the Nazi period. (Mandelstam inverts those perceptions in "The Noise of Time," relishing the intricacy of "Jewish chaos.") Colonizers who disdained the weird sounds of native peoples overlooked the fact that they themselves were causing unprecedented levels of commotion—bells, trumpets, guns, cannons, machines. Noise enables power. As Keizer writes, it is a way of saying, "The world is mine."

Amid the hubbub of urban life, silence is a luxury of the rich. They can afford the full-floor penthouse apartment, the house that sits on a quiet acre. They can install triple-paned windows and pump insulation into the walls. They can, if they choose, become Proust in his cork-lined room. For the rest of society, noise is an index of struggle. Hendy's "Noise," which is based on a 2013 BBC Radio series, documents the ruckus of tenement living in eighteenth-century Edinburgh and the altogether hellish clamor inflicted on ironworkers in nineteenth-century Glasgow. A doctor wrote of a group of Glasgow boilermakers, "The iron on which they stand is vibrating intensely under the blows of perhaps twenty hammers wielded by twenty powerful men. Confined by the walls of the boiler, the waves of sound are vastly intensified, and strike the tympanum with appalling force."

The colossal cacophony of the Industrial Revolution prompted some of the first serious efforts at noise control. Often, these amounted to crabby élitism. Charles Babbage lamented the "organ-grinders and other similar nuisances" who were degrading the productivity of "intellectual workers." Charles Dickens signed a letter claiming that writers and artists had become "especial objects of persecution by brazen performers on brazen instruments." But the New York anti-noise activist Julia Barnett Rice, who founded the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise in 1906, transcended upper-crust narcissism by arguing that people of all backgrounds were suffering from excessive noise in schools and hospitals. She intuited what scientific studies later confirmed—that noise can inhibit learning and complicate health issues. It can also, of course, cause auditory damage, in the form of tinnitus, and hearing loss.

Attempts to mitigate and legislate noise levels run up against the challenge of adjudicating which sounds are excessive and unpleasant. Measuring loudness is itself a tricky business. The decibel scale, like the Richter scale, is logarithmic, and it accounts for quirky neural responses to changing stimuli. A twenty-decibel sound is generally perceived as being twice as loud as a ten-decibel one, yet the actual intensity is ten times greater. Furthermore, the decibel scale is customarily weighted to factor in additional peculiarities. We are more sensitive to upper frequencies (a soprano is more conspicuous than a bass), to indoor sounds, to nighttime sounds. With all these complexities, noise codes, where they exist, are difficult to enforce. In 2022, New York City's Department of Environmental Protection received nearly fifty thousand complaints but imposed monetary penalties in only a hundred and twenty-three instances.

Emergency warnings—foghorns, locomotive whistles, ambulance and fire-truck sirens, air-raid sirens—fall into a special category of necessary, life-saving noise. Car horns are a borderline case: sometimes they stave off disaster, but more often they foster road rage. Matthew F. Jordan's "Danger Sound Klaxon! The Horn That Changed History" studies one of the most purposefully obnoxious noises of modern times—the "aa-ooo-gah!" honk that became ubiquitous on American roads in the early twentieth century. In a free-for-all traffic environment, drivers alerted pedestrians and other vehicle operators by using the horn incessantly. Ads for the Klaxon—Invented by the electrical engineer Miller Reese Hutchison, and introduced in 1907—boasted of its ability to "cut through and kill musical sounds." Raw panic was the aim. During the First World War, the Klaxon was used to warn of gas attacks; it then declined in popularity, partly because traumatized veterans reacted poorly to its squawk.

We humans have a high tolerance for noise, despite our ambivalence. In some way, we seem to require it. Other species feel differently about the never-ending sonic havoc of the Anthropocene. Caspar Henderson, in "A Book of Noises: Notes on the Auraculous," points out that when our species stayed mostly indoors during the early months of the *covid* pandemic the animal world reacted with apparent relief: "Birdsongs regained qualities that had last been recorded decades before, when cities were quieter. The white-crowned sparrows, for instance, extended their sounds back down into lower frequencies . . . and their songs became richer, fuller and more complex." Birds also sang more softly: they "had been 'shouting,' just as people raise their voices on a construction site or at a noisy party." Their stress levels likely declined. Noise is another dimension of humanity's ruination of the natural world.

The inexorable advance of technological noise in the twentieth century—cars, airplanes, helicopters, pile drivers, lawnmowers, leaf blowers, home stereos, stadium sound systems—left the impression that the world was getting louder year by year. This may well have been so, but in recent decades there has actually been a levelling off, or even a decline, in certain types of noise. Jet engines are less thunderous than they were in the seventies. The increasing popularity of electric vehicles has brought about a situation in which cars can be dangerously inaudible to pedestrians. (Artificial engine noise has become a feature of electric models.) People now routinely listen to music on laptops and headphones, reducing incursions of bass.

These modest gains are offset by the rise of informational noise, which further blurs the meaning of the already confused parent word. Chen-Pang Yeang's "Transforming Noise: A History of Its Science and Technology from Disturbing Sounds to Informational Errors, 1900-1955" is thick with mathematical equations, yet it still tells an interesting story even for those of us who will skip the more technical pages. Beneath the vehicular roar in the years around 1900 was a simmering new electronic sound, native to the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, and other forms of transmission and reproduction. Yeang describes this noise as "disturbances and fluctuations of electrical current due to the movements of microscopic charge carriers in electronic tubes and other circuit components." Such sounds weren't aggressively unpleasant, yet they hampered the communication of messages, verbal or musical. Scientists and engineers set about studying this electronic sizzle and figuring out how to reduce it.

The investigation soon intersected with ongoing inquiries into the movement of gas and liquid particles. Einstein's papers on Brownian motion, between 1905 and 1908, not only established the existence of atoms; they also helped to systematize the discipline of statistical mechanics, which describes patterns of random fluctuations over time, also known as stochastic processes. Defense work during the Second World War adapted those insights to military ends: devising uncrackable cryptography, resisting

signal jamming, reducing interference in anti-aircraft radar systems. Claude Shannon, the founder of information theory, took an even more significant step by demonstrating how a signal can cope with a “noisy” channel—literally or figuratively—if it behaves in a noisy, stochastic way: by spreading itself across a broad spectrum, it transmits more effectively. That insight underpins modern cellular and wireless communications. It was a curious extension of the logic of the Klaxon: in a world full of noise, you punch through by making noise at a superior level.

Soon enough, the concept of stochastic noise, often simplified to the point of vanishing, achieved currency in a dizzying array of fields. Noise studies of recent decades examine perturbations in the stock market (the economist Fischer Black’s paper “Noise”), unreliable patterns in decision-making (Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass Sunstein’s “Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment”), and irregularities in political polling (Nate Silver’s “The Signal and the Noise”). The proposed corrective for such errancy is, very often, the dreaded algorithm. Kahneman and company argued that algorithms, being “noise-free,” can “outperform human judgment.” Machine-learning protocols in artificial intelligence, meanwhile, rely heavily on stochastic processes. The ultimate import of much of this work is that humans are themselves randomly fluctuating particles whose behavior, in aggregate, can be forecast by probabilistic methods.

Yeang helps out the mathematically illiterate by offering a literary frame for noise’s semantic shift. In his introduction, he juxtaposes a nineteenth-century account of invasive sound—Nathaniel Hawthorne’s dismayed reaction to a train whistle—with the Reagan-era data-scape of Don DeLillo’s “White Noise,” with its swarm of “words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes.” White noise is a sound field in which all frequencies are equally intense. When the married couple at the novel’s center, Babette and Jack, have a conversation about death, the crack of doom becomes a wash of static:

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white.”

White noise is the master noise in which all other noises drown. The perpetual swirl of cultural particles mutes the resonance of any individual voice. The irony is that the atomized buzz common to so much late-twentieth-century technology—fax machines, dial-up modems, the hiss between stations on a radio dial, the “Poltergeist” snow of a TV left on overnight—has largely faded. Such noise now resides in our minds, as we fend off notifications, updates, “Just for You” suggestions, consumer-feedback requests, obscene spam, clickbait headlines, A.I.-generated news stories, A.I.-generated news stories about A.I., and the whole silently screaming rest of it.

From time to time, nature unleashes a noise so immense that it restores the Biblical grandeur of the word. Many books on noise mention the Indonesian volcano Krakatoa, which, in August, 1883, disgorged what is commonly called the loudest sound in modern history. The eruption was audible from as far as three thousand miles away. The captain of a British ship that was forty miles distant wrote, “So violent are the explosions that the eardrums of over half my crew have been shattered. My last thoughts are with my dear wife. I am convinced that the Day of Judgment has come.”

In October, I went to the Brooklyn experimental-music venue *ISSUE* Project Room to hear “VirtuAural Electro-Mechanics,” a fifty-minute-long audio collage by the sound artist Francisco López. The performance space—a cavernous Beaux-Arts gallery that McKim, Mead & White had originally designed for the Elks organization—was plunged into darkness. Attendees were given masks to cover their eyes. In a program note, López writes, “This creation was developed from a myriad of original sound recordings of mechanical machines, electro-mechanical systems and industrial environments gathered over the past 25 years all over the world; from food factories to ‘white rooms,’ from 18th-century automata to computers, from wood and wires to magnetism, from the microscopic to the monumental.”

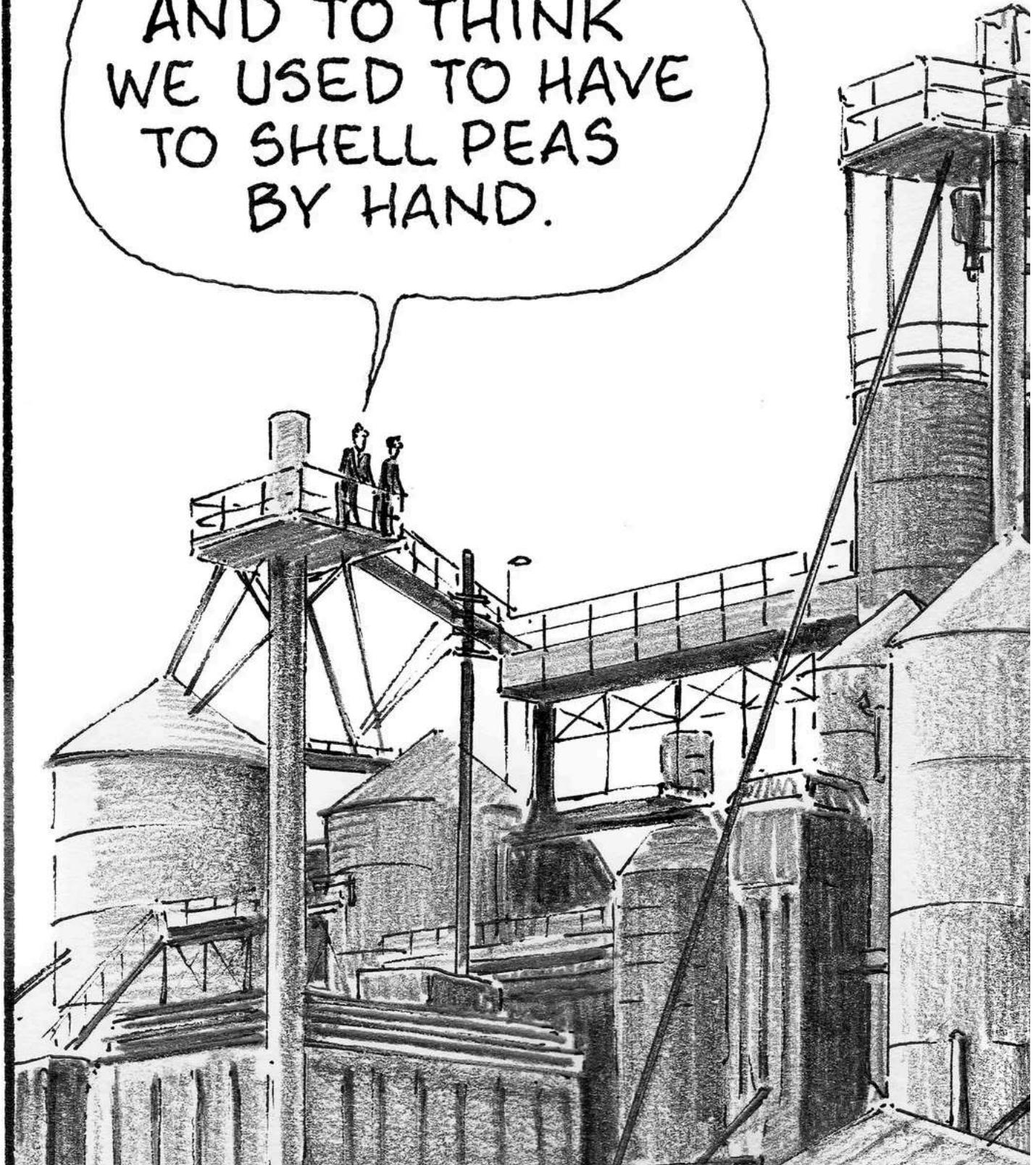
If you demand that music provide an oasis of melodious sweetness, “VirtuAural Electro-Mechanics” would not be for you. It is an experience of overwhelming density. Loudness is not its chief characteristic—any average rock show or dance club would outdo it in decibels—but it covers such a vast range of frequencies and timbres, from lung-shaking bass tones to a tintinnabulation in stratospheric registers, that the brain struggles to assimilate the entirety of it. I imagined phantom structures in the air: the sound was bleeding into my other senses.

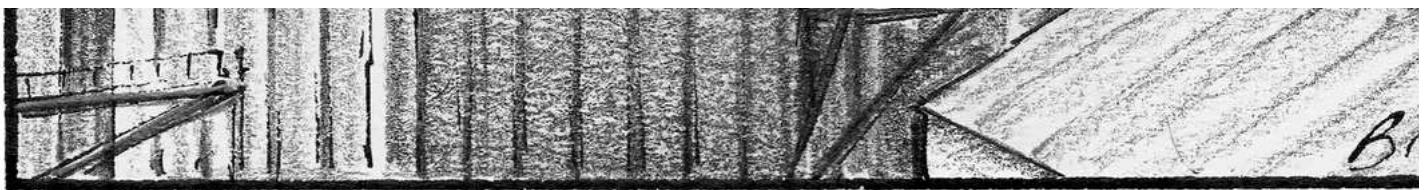
Is “VirtuAural Electro-Mechanics” music? In the usual sense, no. The Oxford English Dictionary associates music with “beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.,” implicitly excluding machines in food factories. The great German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, in his 1863 tome, “On the Sensations of Tone,” frames music as the opposite of noise. A musical tone, Helmholtz writes, is a “perfectly undisturbed, uniform sound.” Noise is a jumble of rapid, irregular signals. Certain combinations of tones are more pleasing than others, on account of physiological principles that Helmholtz charts in extraordinary detail. European composers have perfected the art of harmony—creating, it would appear, a bulwark against noise.

In this same period, though, composers began to have different ideas. Like birds, they were listening to the world around them and mimicking its increasingly raucous character. In Wagner’s “Das Rheingold,” the subterranean smithy of the Nibelungs is evoked by a percussion section that includes, according to the score, eighteen anvils. For a few bars, the orchestra stops playing and the anvils hammer away on their own—industry incarnate. Harmony, meanwhile, was drifting from its tonal moorings: fearsome dissonances in the music of Mahler, Strauss, and Scriabin suggested both the outer density of modern life and the inner turmoil of the individual. Mahler said, “If we want thousands to hear us in the huge auditoriums of our concert halls and opera houses, we simply have to make a lot of noise [*Lärm*].”

Matters came to a head in 1913. The brutish chords that stomp through the second section of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” pack seven of the twelve notes of the Western chromatic scale into a confined space: as a result, pitch becomes a blur. T. S. Eliot later wrote that the “Rite” seems to “transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway . . . to transform these despairing noises into music.” On March 31, 1913, two months before the première of the “Rite,” a concert in Vienna featuring works by Arnold Schoenberg and his circle let loose an even more disturbing sound. In Alban Berg’s orchestral song “Über die Grenzen des All,” or “Beyond the Limits of the Universe,” the winds and the brass intone a soft, unearthly sonority in which all twelve pitches are heard. This is an instrumental approximation of white noise, long before the term had been coined. The concert promptly devolved into a riot, one that even the famous uproar around the “Rite” could not equal. Fisticuffs broke out, the police were called, and a lawsuit ensued.

AND TO THINK
WE USED TO HAVE
TO SHELL PEAS
BY HAND.





Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

In that same year of discord and scandal, the Futurist painter Luigi Russolo published a manifesto titled “L’Arte dei Rumori” (“The Art of Noises”), in which he wrote, “For years, Beethoven and Wagner have deliciously shaken our hearts. Now we are fed up with them. This is why we get infinitely more pleasure imagining combinations of the sounds of trolleys, autos and other vehicles, and loud crowds.” To that end, Russolo and his brother Antonio devised a battery of homemade noise instruments. A recording from 1921 suggests a café band tooling away in a room with bad plumbing. Other composers made more persuasive ventures: solo-percussion works by Amadeo Roldán and by Edgard Varèse, early electronic experiments by Paul Hindemith and by Oskar Sala, noise collages by the young John Cage. Varèse’s mammoth orchestral piece “Amériques,” which descended on Carnegie Hall in 1926, conjures the full pandemonium of the metropolis, with a New York Fire Department siren filling out the orchestra. George Antheil, in his “Ballet Mécanique,” which arrived at Carnegie the following year, called for airplane propellers whirring onstage, though he had to settle for electric fans.

As Yeang notes in “Transforming Noise,” Antheil played a cameo role in the evolution of stochastic research. During the Second World War, he assisted the Hollywood star Hedy Lamarr, an Austrian émigré with a mathematical gift, in designing a frequency-hopping technology that would have prevented the jamming of torpedo-guidance systems. Nothing immediately came of the Lamarr-Antheil scheme, though it forecast later breakthroughs. After the war, the engineer turned composer Iannis Xenakis transformed stochastic process into musical language. The instrumental lines of his 1955–56 score “Pithoprakta” are explicitly modelled on Brownian motion. Ligeti’s “Poème Symphonique,” from 1962, does something analogous. At first, the hundred metronomes generate a uniform cloud of indistinguishable ticktocks. Then, as one device after another winds down, the remaining voices become audible. In performance, the “Poème” begins as a comedy and ends as a tragedy—an emblem of a dying ecosystem.

Noise enriched popular music, too. Jazz musicians, extending the blues tradition, activated pitches outside the standard twelve-note gamut. The sirenlike sneer of the trombone glissando became a signature sound. Jazz not only cut through the crackle of surface noise but also thrived on it. The emergence of a full-blown jazz avant-garde, after the Second World War, brought musical modernism to an exuberant peak. Rock entered its noise-art phase in the seventies and eighties, with the industrial grind of such bands as Throbbing Gristle and Einstürzende Neubauten. Hip-hop manipulated noise from the outset. Hank Shocklee, Public Enemy’s master producer, echoed the rhetoric of Varèse and Cage when he said, “We believed that music is nothing but organized noise. You can take anything—street sounds, us talking, whatever you want—and make it music by organizing it. . . . This thing you call music is a lot broader than you think it is.”

Supreme among noisemakers is Yoko Ono, who first made her name as a principled provocateur in the downtown New York scene—next to her, Cage looked timid—and then shot to global fame through her relationship with John Lennon. Her furiously nuanced screaming of the word “why” at the beginning of “Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band,” from 1970, was a masterly act of one-upmanship in the face of the masculinist assault of mainstream rock and roll. Beatles fans, confronted with noise of a higher order, were as aghast as the socialite aristocrats who booed “The Rite of Spring.” Noise is only one part of Ono’s mercurial practice—she is equally drawn to meditative gentleness—but she deserves a central place in histories of the genre. For the most part, she has been left out of them.

Implicit in the art of noise is a promise of resistance. For millennia, music has been a medium of control; noise, it follows, is a liberation. Schoenberg went so far as to speak of the “emancipation of the dissonance,” making his harmonic innovations sound like a civil-rights matter. The social theorist Jacques Attali, in his 1977 book, “Noise: The Political Economy of Music,” put a sophisticated spin on that argument. The *bruit nouveau* that Attali hears emerging from free jazz and the European avant-garde has a revolutionary import: it denies the marketplace, it refuses popular taste, it involves “inventing new codes” and “playing for one’s own pleasure.” Subsequent treatises, such as Paul Hegarty’s “Noise/Music,” have maintained Helmholtz’s duality while reversing its biases, so that noise heroically destroys music’s stifling banalities.

The question is: Resistance to what? Nothing about noisemaking guarantees personal or political virtue. Russolo, like many other members of the Futurist movement, found a way to reconcile his bourgeois-bashing ideas with Fascist aesthetics. Varèse was tainted by racism and antisemitism. In more recent decades, Nazi iconography and vocabulary have adorned noise records by Whitehouse and Boyd Rice. The magisterial Japanese noise artist Masami Akita, who has released hundreds of implacably obliterative recordings under the name Merzbow, has shown self-awareness about this mentality of domination. “Sometimes I would like to kill the much too noisy Japanese by my own Noise,” he has said. “The effects of Japanese culture are too much noise everywhere. I want to make silence by my Noise. Maybe that is a fascist way of using sound.”

Stephen Graham, who teaches courses on underground music at Goldsmiths, in London, takes a different tack in “Becoming Noise Music,” a survey of the field since the seventies. Aware of the murkiness surrounding the notion of resistance, Graham focusses instead on the genre’s aesthetics. Furthermore, the opposition of “noise” and “music” dissatisfies him: the appeal of this grittiest of genres lies precisely in the erasure of the boundary between the two. There is no way of talking about noise without taking pleasure into account. The pleasure may be confined to a niche audience, and perhaps a somewhat masochistic one, but it exists all the same. No one chooses to listen to a sound because of what it is not.

How do you articulate the aesthetics of a music that follows a logic of dumbfounding excess? Graham makes a good stab in some pages devoted to Merzbow’s album “Noisembryo,” from 1994. He begins by observing, somewhat dryly, that the listener is “confronted with a kind of chaotic ‘order’ or musicality flickering into and out of existence as, say, a steady pulse pattern emerges, or an oscillating bass drone throbs into existence, or a panrhythm of clashing noise layers suddenly locks into polyrhythmic place.” He then switches to stream-of-consciousness italics to convey the rush of surrender: “*I flow into the beating world, staying there as the music keeps changing and pulsing; it’s possible to transcend—trance—in this way with more conventional music, but the low rate of repetition and high rate of density and strangeness in noise means that such trancing can have a particularly rich tensile quality when it’s achieved. . . . This music takes me out of (my) self and makes me cosmic.*”

Such effusions are a bit embarrassing to read—but any critic who wishes to capture pleasure must embarrass the reader sooner or later. I experience feelings similar to Graham’s when I lose myself in exemplary spells of musical noise, whether it’s Merzbow, Ono, the apocalyptic war scenes in Chaya Czernowin’s opera “Infinite Now,” or the Krakatoan subwoofer frequencies of Ash Fure’s installation “Hive Rise.” The thrill I get from such sounds doesn’t contradict my abiding love for Bach, Schubert, and Brahms any more than the abstract frenzy of a Jackson Pollock contradicts the radiant calm of a Fra Angelico. What I love about noise is its insistence on otherness, on difference. If music were ever to become a universal language, it would be dead.

As for López’s “VirtuAural Electro-Mechanics,” it left me in a state of happy vacancy, as if the digital detritus in my brain had been swept away. Yet I had been engaged in active, alert listening. I’d been nodding and swaying in time, even when no beat was apparent. The colliding pulses seemed to coalesce into a fundamental ghost rhythm that was as insistent as any pounding bass. The mind is its own place, as Milton’s Lucifer says. It can establish its own order, its own harmony. I walked out into the streets of Brooklyn feeling alive, serene, peculiarly free. When I entered the screech of the subway, though, I winced and put on noise-cancelling headphones. ♦



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[The “Unfit” Mothers of Ariana Harwicz](#)

Her fiction allows us to spelunk in the cave of an unwell mind, but her latest novel is disturbing in other ways, too.

By Jessica Winter

The New Yorker Interview

[Chris Kraus Reinvents the True-Crime Novel](#)

Her début, “I Love Dick,” was an epistolary memoir of erotic obsession that redefined the form. In “The Four Spent the Day Together,” she turns another genre on its head.

By Jennifer Wilson

Open Questions

[Should College Get Harder?](#)

A.I. is coming for knowledge work, and yet college seems to be getting easier. Does something need to change?

By Joshua Rothman

Life and Letters

[A Forgotten Queen Bee of Modern Poetry](#)

A débutante, a burlesque dancer, and a poet, the shape-shifting V. R. Lang—who died at thirty-two—wrote some of the most aching, entrancing lines of the twentieth century.

By Anthony Lane

Goings On

[Misty Copeland’s Ballet Send-Off](#)

Also: Doechii’s star turn, Agosto Machado’s collaged worlds, Jafar Panahi’s new drama, and more.

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