

of which he dreamt. Two decades later, in the early 1950s, the European avant-garde became captivated by the extraordinary powers of these electronic instruments, which extended the domain of music far beyond that of traditional instrumental sonories.

In the decades that followed, commercial synthesizers tamed these unruly powers and made tidy electronic instruments available to the general public. By the 1970s, such instruments had become the norm in rock and dance music. Aiming to revive and celebrate the powers of noise, British and European "industrial" bands merged punk rock attitudes, performance art sensibilities, and a Fussolian fascination with mechanical noise to forge a retro-futurist music made with found objects: chains, tire irons, oil drums, and other industrial debris. "Industrial music" and the "noise bands" that followed highlighted certain cultural and political features of noise: noise as disturbance, distraction, and threat.

Noise has also functioned as a vehicle for ecstasy and transcendence, shaping the musical aesthetic of drone-based minimalists La Monte Young and Tony Conrad as well as the free jazz players from Albert Ayler and John Coltrane through David S. Ware and Sabir Mateen. And punk, Hip-Hop, and Heavy Metal have revealed the notion of noise, transforming it into a marker of power, resistance, and pleasure.

The rise of interest in "noise" in contemporary music has gone hand in hand with a new interest in its conceptual opposite: silence. With his Zen embrace of contradiction, John Cage attempted to erase the distinction between silence and music, while simultaneously noting that perfect silence is never more than a conceptual ideal, an aural vanishing point. In the face of rising noise levels in urban and rural environments, composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schaffer called for "the recovery of positive silence" and a subtle attention to the endangered non-musical sounds of our environment. Microphones and headphones brought the vanishing point of silence within aural reach, forever transforming the relationship of silence to sound, giving them equal ontological status.

What is music? According to Jacques Attali, it is the constant effort to codify and stratify noise and silence, which, for their part, always threaten it from without. From Russolo through DJ Culture, experimental musical practices have inhabited that borderland where noise and silence become music and vice versa.

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1. John Cage, "Future of Music: Credo," chap. 6, below.

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Noise and Politics

JACQUES ATTALI

During the 1980s, economic theorist Jacques Attali (1943–) was Special Counselor to French President François Mitterand. He subsequently headed the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and is currently contributing editor to *Foreign Policy* magazine. With the publication of *Noise* in 1977, Attali quickly became one of Europe's leading philosophers of music. For Attali, music, like economics and politics, is fundamentally a matter of organizing dissonance and subversion—in a word, "noise." Yet Attali argues that, an all-but-immaterial force, music moves faster than economics and politics and, hence, prefigures new social relations.

[...] Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political. More than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies. With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men, Clamor, Melody, Dissonance, Harmony; when it is fashioned by man with specific tools, when it invades man's time, when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream—Music. It is at the heart of the progressive rationalization of aesthetics, and it is a refuge for residual irrationality; it is a means of power and a form of entertainment.

Everywhere codes analyze, mark, restrain, train, repress, and channel the primitive sounds of language, of the body, of tools, of objects, of the relations to self and others.

All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all of its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form. Among birds a tool for marking territorial boundaries, noise is inscribed from the start within the panoply of power. Equivalent to the articulation of a space, it indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard

within it, how to survive by drawing one's sustenance from it.¹ And since noise is the source of power, power has always listened to it with fascination. In an extraordinary and little known text, Leibniz describes in minute detail the ideal political organization, the "Palace of Marvels," a harmonious machine within which all of the sciences of time and every tool of power are deployed.

These buildings will be constructed in such a way that the master of the house will be able to hear and see everything that is said and done without himself being perceived, by means of mirrors and pipes, which will be a most important thing for the State, and a kind of political confessional.²

Eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus. The symbolism of the Frozen Words,³ of the Tables of the Law, of recorded noise and eavesdropping—these are the dreams of the political scientists and the fantasies of men in power: to listen, to memorize—this is the ability to interpret and control history, to manipulate the culture of a people, to channel its violence and hopes. Who among us is free of the feeling that this process, taken to an extreme, is turning the modern State into a gigantic, monopolizing noise emitter, and at the same time, a generalized eavesdropping device. Eavesdropping on what? In order to silence whom?

The answer, clear and implacable, is given by the theorists of totalitarianism. They have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality; a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal—these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature [...]

The economic and political dynamics of the industrialized societies living under parliamentary democracy also lead power to invest art, and to invest in art, without necessarily theorizing its control, as is done under dictatorship. Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power. Here, this channelization takes on a new, less violent, and more subtle form: laws of the political economy take the place of censorship laws. Music and the musician essentially become either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise.

Musical distribution techniques are today contributing to the establishment of a system of eavesdropping and social surveillance. Muzak, the American corporation that sells standardized music, presents itself as the "security system of the 1970s" because it permits use of musical distribution channels for the circulation of orders. The monologue of standardized, stereotyped music accompanies and Except those among the exploited who can still use their music to shout their suffering, their dreams of the absolute and freedom. What is called music today is all too often only a disguise for the monologue of power. However, and this is the supreme irony of it all, never before have musicians tried so hard to communicate with their audience, and never before has that communication been so deceiving. Music now seems hardly more than a somewhat clumsy excuse for the self-glori-

fication of musicians and the growth of a new industrial sector. Still, it is an activity that is essential for knowledge and social relations.

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1. "Whether we inquire into the origin of the arts or observe the first criers, we find that everything in its principle is related to the means of subsistence." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'inégalité*.

2. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Drôle de pensée touchant une nouvelle sorte de représentation," ed. Yves Belaval, *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 70 (1958): 754–68. Quoted in Michel Serres, "Don Juan ou le Palais des Merveilles," *Les Etudes Philosophiques* 3 (1966): 389.

3. [A reference to Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, b. 4, chap. 54.—trans.]