

Between noises: Public spaces, the presence of noise and musical self-care

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ABSTRACT

“Noise” is everywhere. This may be a truism; however, what makes the idea of internoise compelling is precisely that personalised music listening in urban spaces entails that silence is replaced with noise, i.e., if music bleeds through our headphones or we play music on our smartphones without regard to the well-being of others in our vicinity. Drawing on Jacques Attali’s assertion that “nothing essential happens in the absence of noise”, I intend to explore public spaces as arenas that are truly inter-noise in that sound always replaces sound and that we are between noises rather than between noise and silence. Building on this, I go on to discuss Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s suggestion that modern (information) age creates new forms of vulnerability. To this end, I offer a reading of this statement in the light of Marie Skånland’s theory of the use of MP3 players as “musical self-care” and as a means for empowerment and agency.

This opens for understanding music in public spaces as “aesthetic control”, creating relationships between the individual and the environment, but also as a bridge between noises, where noise always takes on the function of defence against other noise.

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“Noise” is everywhere. This assertion opens for several discussions within the broad field of music studies. Michael Bull (2007) suggests that urban space requires constant negotiation, and that music listeners negotiate their movements on their own terms, through a multisensory combination of sound and touch enabled by technology (the iPod), and through their choice of music as a means of tackling the chaotic sound-world of public space. Sounds of one’s own choosing can mask other, more irritating sounds and thus have a positive influence on the way a specific space is encountered; this has also been explored notably by Marie Skånland (2012).

Interestingly, there is also a growing body of work on silence as benevolent. Understanding “noise” as an emblem of extroversion as well as the plight of modern urban life is borne out in motivational and self-help books. These theories tend to lock “silence” and “noise” in a dichotomy with noise as the malevolent counterpart to silence. This binary opposition adumbrates the positive functions of “noise” (e.g., improvised music), but also conceals how “silence”, rather than an attainable good, becomes an abstract ideal of modern life, seemingly offering recourse to a pre-noisy or even Arcadian world that is more “authentic” than modern urban life.

The idea that noise is everywhere, then, may be a truism; however, in the light of this, what makes the idea of inter noise compelling is precisely that personalized music listening in urban spaces entails that silence is replaced with noise – that city dwellers are always

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“combating noise with noise”, blocking out the confusing and unwanted “uncontrollable” sounds of the city with their own choice of sounds. These may in turn be perceived as noise by others, i.e., if our music bleeds through our headphones or we play music on our smartphones without regard to the well-being of others in our vicinity.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Drawing on Jacques Attali’s (1985) assertion that “nothing essential happens in the absence of noise”, I wish to explore public spaces, such as inner-city areas and public transport, as arenas that are truly inter-noise in that sound always replaces sound and that we are always between noises rather than between noise and silence. Here, music may function simultaneously as unwanted noise for fellow travellers, i.e., when leaking through headphones, and as “wanted noise” – the sound of choice – for listeners.

On the other hand, I wish to discuss Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s (2001) suggestion that modern (information) age creates new forms of vulnerability. To this end, I offer a reading of this statement in the light of Skånland’s theory of the use of MP3 players as “musical self-care” – not just as a coping strategy, but also as a means for empowerment and agency. This opens for understanding the use of music in public spaces as “aesthetic control”, creating relationships between the individual and the environment, but also as a bridge between noises, where noise always takes on the function of defence against other noise.

Central to this exploration is the contention that music may not only be a source of noise, but even noise unto itself. In order to adjust my methodology to investigate this set of questions, then, I take vital clues from theorists of popular music and its neighbouring disciplines.

In his observations of the interplay between music and urban geography, Adam Krims (2007) proposes the idea of an *urban ethos*, meaning a representation of urban life that is not only shaped by the experience of big city environments but that also enables and shapes such experience. Krims argues that “the range and forms of representing urban life are shaped by those with access to the means of representation” (2007, 10). What, then, happens when we step outside the representation/s of urban environment and allow noise to filter into it?

Interrogating the urban from a similarly music-informed angle, Sara Cohen (2007) suggests that popular music connects with the life, image, and identity of a city in various ways. Pop songs associate “the city with excitement, presenting it as an escape from the restrictions of family and home and rural or suburban living” (2007, 2); as such, urban music landscapes become arenas for identity formation, enabling mechanisms for mixing as well as exclusion. Cohen also offers a brief meditation on how musical sounds may transgress boundaries and invade space. Observing that gentrification also involves “stringent noise legislation” (2007, 212), she suggests that musicians may also use their music as noise as part of protest against certain negative effects of gentrification processes.

The ideas of escape and transgression both feed into my own exploration of life between noises, highlighting the trans-ideological function of noise as simultaneously benevolent and potentially damaging. What is more, they enable Tia DeNora’s (2000) view of people’s use/s of music as part of a larger framework for social agency. How, then, may this be transposed into an exploration of music use as noise?

Bull’s theorising of the iPod also warrants closer scrutiny, possibly even an update, in the light of how Smartphones may be seen to eclipse the iPod. With the introduction of Smartphones, notably Apple’s iPhone, individuals no longer have to limit themselves to

sound as a technology of identity, agency, or self-care. The negotiation of urban space becomes multimedial, an audiovisual reminder that we tend to find ourselves at the junction of wanted and unwanted noise rather than between noise and silence. Smartphones radically enhance portable technology's potential as generator of noise: somebody watching YouTube video clips on the suburban train, for example, or a young aspiring professional's video conversation with a business partner, or a parent's tool for keeping a fidgety child entertained. One man's source of temporary relief becomes another man's source of irritation.

Like Krims and Cohen, Bull invites a reading of inter-noise soundscapes as an aspect of city life. The noisy environment comes across as both urban and modern, and as visually evocative as it is contingent on any auditive dimension. The mobility of modern urban life, then, also has an element of cosmopolitanism (Bull, 2007); in line with early modernist depictions of urbanity, noise becomes attractive, an emblem of modern urban life with its connotations of enlightenment, comfort, and education. Then again, noise as unwanted disturbance is not contingent on any single arena; it may as well occur in a coach traversing the countryside, or in any suburban setting characterised by "stringent noise legislation".

These works all become points of departure for an investigation that is not identical to either one, but that favourably draws on all of them in order to theorise "noise" not only as the presence of noise but also as enabling life between noises.

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