
NOISE

Etymology of the German words ‘Rausch’ (inebriation; ‘the soul’s drunkenness, the delight of the inner faculties that lead to self-forgetfulness’) and ‘Rauschen’ (noise, as in: white noise or grainy noise, or ‘signal to noise ratio’) reveals an intricate linkage between concepts of acoustic noise, intoxication, and intense pleasure.

And it is not without reason that the meanings of these words connect. Noise, in the context of information technology, is the prototypically unwanted – the beauty of its numerous layers hardly ever perceived. (Who – after all – is still able to enjoy the myriad sonic delights of a telephone connection breaking down.) But the strict sound studio and information technology distinction between signal and noise, crop and weed, need not be. In musical composition it has all but lost its normative force. Only the most fanatical of note-parsing clerks will deny themselves the options and possibilities hinted at by all these side-noises and deviations. As soon as the composer relaxes and hence extends his or her hearing abilities, the undesirable might turn into the main attraction, turning the bad good. New relationships reveal themselves and the enlightened ear starts conjuring wide open spaces from nowhere, all a tribute to the might of human perception. In the digital domain, losing or misinterpreting the code leads to the collapse of symbolic systems, the coherence of any signal turning to gibberish without even changing one bit of the material information.

A four minute section (track 007) of *Variations in Air Pressure* is a sonic miniature using source material which resulted from an attempt to create, in a judicial grey area, a de-centralised backup copy of one of John Cage’s radiophonic works. The download, re-encoding and burning to CD produced a sonic result rather different to what was intended; wide-band noises with at times drastic changes in spectrum and amplitude. Once in a while a voice seems to shine through (“John?”); the human ear – especially when confronted with steady noise lacking distinct features, where the highest density (an all-frequency spectrum) meets a complete lack of form – is tempted by the smallest deviations into trying to construe meaning.

And it is very different sounds that are referred to as ‘noise / Rauschen’, and wholly different activities and events result in rather similar sonic structures (also ‘Rauschen’). Its real world context stripped away by loudspeakers, a waterpipe’s acoustic properties are not dissimilar to the sounds emitted by a computer harddisk. Ripping paper reveals its sonic similarity to poured sand; a little stream of water bears more than a passing resemblance to a turning grindstone. One of the most fascinating aspects of these sounds relates to the formation of numerous infinitesimal events, which – in their entirety – form rich and ever fluctuating spectra and spatial situations. ‘Rauschen’ is a place for the meeting of possibilities, a space with options to liaise on sonic as well as semantic terms, to unveil the wide open spaces of noisebands and -fields.

Every signal can be transformed into ‘Rauschen’ and from there all possible signals may emerge – in composition it’s the proverbial goldmine. A violin’s sound is slowly, confidently distorted – enriched with, until it finally succumbs to, noise. From this bed of noise anything might emerge without a soul taking offence. A city’s soundscape for example; a gloriously causal progression, a non-sequitur fully accounted for by noise and chronology.

Of musicians, the unfortunate few devoting themselves to intoxicating drink report that this sometimes alters perception. A certain distance is said to emerge, or sometimes a greater affinity, and with it a disposition to follow up possibilities of alternative meaning – things easily overlooked in the context of everyday life. And this rings true with all we’ve said here about the process of composing music.

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