

Epstein, Josh. *Sublime Noise*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 338 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1421415239

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“Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school? Are the people inside the school musical and the ones outside unmusical?”<sup>1</sup>

These two questions by John Cage illustrate a common dilemma on the meaning of music that some western composers -- and some western writers, likewise -- have been reflecting upon for a long time. More specifically speaking, music composers as well as writers have been confronting the increasing necessity of responding to a noisy environment by including into their compositions sounds inspired or generated by modern industry, agitated large-city life, warfare, and electronic devices, among others. Looking into recent western-world history, one can find the reasons and means that have provoked such unprecedented artistic necessity. Thus, for the last one hundred fifty years, creators in all the arts -- especially in music and literature -- have been immersed in one of the most revolutionary periods in the history of human race.

That revolution is evident in the field of music composition, as never before, had composers experienced the coexistence of a great plurality of conceptually opposing compositional approaches, techniques and styles; such as, tonality vs. atonality; serialism vs. indeterminacy, acoustical instrumented vs. new electronic instruments, among other compositional trends. Never before, had composers engaged in such a fascinating “dialogue” with amazing yet overwhelming technological advances; for instance, computer-generated compositions, electronically manipulation of sounds, mixed media resources, etc. Never before had composers been challenged by so many multicultural, economic and socio-political factors; for example, two world wars, nuclear weapons development, the threat of global warming, etc. Such an intricate tapestry of contrasting elements and paradoxical conditions situates composers, as well as writers, in an ever more “noisy” world. Consequently, noise is no longer seen as a sonic category, aesthetically “contrary” to sound. Indeed, noise is considered as a means to approach and interpret the development of music and literature in our modern society. It is in this

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<sup>1</sup> John Cage (Taken from, “Communication,” the third of the Composition as a Process lectures given in Darmstadt in 1958 and published in *Silence*, by John Cage.)

context of a meaningful noise “landscape,” where *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer* emerges to find the significance of noise in modernist music and literature.

*Sublime Noise* is the first book written by Josh Epstein, an Assistant Professor of English at Portland State University. There, he researches and teaches in 20th-century Anglophone modernism, critical theory, sound studies, film, musicology, and adaptation studies. On Professor Epstein’s own words, *Sublime Noise*

“addresses the intersections among noise, literature, music, and Frankfurt Schoolish critical theory. I argue that noise operates as a symptom of art’s economic and social condition: both writers and composers, in other words, think about noise as the point where their autonomy as artists breaks down and the material/social value of their art becomes audible. Focusing on writers such as James Joyce, E.M. Forster, Edith Sitwell, T.S. Eliot, Theodor Adorno, and Ezra Pound, as well as composers such as George Antheil, William Walton, and Benjamin Britten, this project merges modern literary and cultural studies with the so-called “new musicology.”<sup>2</sup>

*Sublime Noise* presents an erudite analysis of selected works of major modernist writers from America, Ireland, and England, in relation to major musical compositions and cultures from these countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The book structure consists of a long introduction and six chapters. Each one is carefully articulated with clear examples of musical and literary works. In every chapter, Epstein gives us an excellent and well substantiated analysis of the theoretical and aesthetic interconnections between music, literature and culture which took place during the complex and interdisciplinary modernist period.

It is interesting to observe that by using dissonance and rhythm as prominent structural parameters, the author presents detailed explanations of the reasons why noise becomes so relevant in the creation of music and modernist literature. Also, he exhaustively examines the means and conditions in which-composers and writers absorb and process into their works the surrounding noise from factories, transportation vehicles, warfare, and stressful urban life.

Prof. Epstein uses a highly organized discourse which makes this book a real treasure for acquiring a profound knowledge and understanding of the relationship between music, literature and culture in the Anglophone modernist society. Furthermore, through the employment of accurate technical language in all related fields, the author demonstrates the way music, literature and culture execute a mutual influence during this interdisciplinary period of history. As a matter of fact, music, and literature gain from and exchange new meaning with each other.

This book is a valuable resource, not only for scholars of Anglophone literary modernism, musicologists, culture sociologists and composers, but also, for scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Josh Epstein’s webpage: <https://jbepstein.wordpress.com/>

interested in interdisciplinary research in the arts. It is relevant to point out that Prof. Epstein's thesis and methodology on the relationship between musical culture and the modernist writer could possibly apply to analyze the connection that Hispanic Modernist writers -- such as Ruben Dario -- had with music and culture from Hispanic America. Moreover, instead of considering "noise" as an influential factor in the works of modernist Hispanic composers and writers, the analysis would have to address the interaction between sound, literature and music. Also, it would have to focus on the reason and purpose modernist Hispanic writers had for giving a new sound and meaning to the Spanish language through the assimilation of a foreign "sonic landscape" --- specifically, the French language as well as art and music from the Impressionist period --- leading to the reinterpretation of the Hispanic American cultural identity.

Through exploring, analyzing and interpreting the relationships among modernist literature, music, noise, and aural culture, *Sublime Noise*, on one hand, opens an interdisciplinary route to discover new literary and cultural meaning to music. On the other hand, it reveals a new musical appreciation of, not only modernist literature, but also, many literary works of our times.