
Strange and Sacred Noise

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"Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise. . . in most cultures, the theme of noise lies at the origin of the religious idea. . . Music, then, constitutes communication with this primordial, threatening noise - prayer." Jacques Attali

Sonic Geometry

My music has long been grounded in the physical, cultural and spiritual landscapes of the North and in an ideal of sonic geography - place as music, and music as place. More recently, I've begun to explore new aspects of the relationships between music and place, in a convergence of sonic geography with sonic geometry.

We often think of music as a kind of language, which of course it can well be. But rather than a music of discourse, mine is a music of the sounding image. My concern is not with musical "ideas" and the rhetoric of composition, but with the singular sonority - that sound which stands for nothing other than itself, filling time and space with the vivid, physical presence of a place.

Purifying Violence

For many years now, I've listened carefully to the sounds of the natural world and attempted to translate what I've heard there into my own music. Initially, I was attracted to the songs of birds and other more "poetic" dimensions of the soundscape. But gradually, I've been drawn to the "noisier" sounds of nature - ocean waves and waterfalls, storm winds and thunder, glaciers crashing into the sea - those elemental voices which resonate so profoundly in the human mind and spirit.

Some time ago, during a time of personal crisis, I camped alone in early spring on the banks of the Yukon River, listening to the sounds of the great river breaking free from the frozen stillness of winter. The delicate, glass tones of candle ice swirling in a whirlpool, the intricate arpeggios of meltwater dripping, and the ominous rumbling and grinding of icebergs struck resonance's deep within me. Immersed in these sounds and in the arresting presence of that elemental violence, my personal concerns began to seem small and inconsequential.

The awesome and indifferent forces of nature are stark reminders of the insignificance of our personal dramas and passions. They offer us undeniable reassurance that whatever we may inflict upon ourselves and one another, there are processes at work in the world far larger, older and more complex than we can understand.

Standing on the bank of a great river at breakup, or near a tidewater glacier as a massive wall of ice explodes into the sea, we are confronted with the overwhelming violence of nature. . . a violence at once terrifying and comforting, transpersonal and purifying.

The Sound of Chaos

My growing fascination with the violence of nature led me to a rudimentary study of chaos theory, fractal geometry and the science of complexity - recent attempts by Western science to describe the rich patterns of the world. As I contemplated the strange beauty of fractal forms and processes, my composer's curiosity was aroused. Quite naturally, I wondered: How might these intriguing phenomena sound ?

My first exploration of this question is Strange and Sacred Noise - an extended cycle of pieces for percussion quartet, combining my long-standing passion for sounds and images from the natural world with a newly-found fascination for the mathematics of dynamic systems. In this music, I attempted to translate a few of the reiterated, self-similar forms of simple, linear fractals into sound and time, in search of their audible equivalents.

Chaos theory arrives at the most complex of ends from the simplest of means. In painting, Mark Rothko spoke of his similar aspiration to "the simple expression of the complex thought". In that spirit, I began my investigation of fractals as music with the simplest of forms: the so called "classical" fractals, created by linear, iterative processes. Compared with the mind-boggling complexities of forms generated by the Julia and the Mandelbrot Sets, these fractals are relatively simple. Still, they offer intriguing enigmas and rich metaphors.

I wanted to get a "hands-on" feel for the behavior of these forms and processes, so rather than relying on a computer for composition or generation of the sounds, I composed scores in conventional notation, to be played by human performers on acoustical instruments. I wanted to savor the learning, weighing the full resonance of the fundamental principles inherent in these simplest of fractals, before moving into more complex territory.

Inevitable Symmetries

Form is idealized space. Sound is audible time. Form defines a context. Sound embodies the presence of the moment.

As in much of my music, the musical forms of Strange and Sacred Noise are large, simple and symmetrical. Overall symmetry helps me break free of the conventions of composition by relationship. Strange and Sacred Noise

Symmetry is predictable: One equals one. It neutralizes questions about where a piece is "going", or what will happen next. If the next sound is inevitable, then it's free to stand only for itself. Without the expectations of narrative development or "the element of surprise", both the composer and listener are free simply to listen to the music.

Composing within audible forms and processes, as James Tenney once succinctly put it: "The composer isn't privy to anything."

Although I feel free to break the symmetry at any time, I try to do so primarily in response to the physical characteristics of the instruments, or to practical realities of performance and notation, rather than to my own ideas of what should happen next. Morton Feldman did this with an exquisite touch. He called his forms "crippled symmetry". (In fact, that's the title of one of his later works.) I think this is also something of what Barnett Newman meant when he spoke of "busting the geometry" in his paintings.

I want my music to have both formal rigor and visceral impact. Through the discipline of a simple, overall formal symmetry, I hope to move beyond self-expression and the limits of my own imagination, to a deeper awareness of the sound itself. Occasionally, I feel compelled to break the form, in order to transcend it. But as both listener and composer, I'm most deeply

moved when the music has little or nothing to do with personal expression.

Beyond Expression

In *Strange and Sacred Noise*, my interest was not in sending messages, but in receiving them. This is not music as communication, but music as communion.

At times during the seven years in which I worked on this cycle, I wondered whether this was music at all. Its dynamics range from the threshold of audibility to the threshold of pain. It embraces unsettling timbres and virtually the entire audible spectrum of sound. Its dense, nearly-static fields of sound seem to invite boredom. But my touchstone throughout was a deepening faith in the power of noise as a vehicle of transformation and revelation.

Ultimately, I've come to regard the six sections of *Strange and Sacred Noise* not so much as musical compositions or pieces, but as places...places for listening, places in which to experience the elemental mystery of noise.

Much of this music is loud. It buzzes the eardrums, rattles the ribcage, and immerses the listener an overwhelming physical presence of sound. Some of that presence is not actually written on the page. It arises spontaneously in the air, through the dynamic interplay of complex, high-energy sounds - (thundering drums, roaring tam-tams, hammered bells, wailing sirens) - the acoustics of the performance space, and the psycho-acoustics of our own hearing.

If *Strange and Sacred Noise* asks unusual attentiveness of the listener, it places extraordinary demands on the performers - both musically and physically. It demands unflinching intensity of concentration, sustained, vigorous athleticism and, at times, the quiet intensity and slow equipoise of Yoga or Tai Chi. Although a performance of this music is visually and sonically dramatic, this is not so much theater as it is ritual - a ceremony in search of a shared experience of transcendence.

The strange power of noise can open doorways to the ecstatic. Musical traditions throughout the world have explored this power for centuries. My own most powerful experience of this has been through the all-night drumming, chant and dance ceremonies of the Iñupiat and Yup'ik Eskimo peoples - ceremonies which demonstrably alter the consciousness of listeners and participants, through the rapid and insistent reiteration of loud, acoustically-complex sounds.

Beyond the usual expressive associations of "musical" sounds, noise touches and moves us in profound ways. Through its sheer physicality, noise commands our attention and breaks down the barriers we construct between ourselves and awareness. Immersed in the enveloping presence of elemental noise, in the fullness of the present moment, we just may begin to hear, with the whole of the self, something of the inaudible totality of sound.
