

## A singularity of noise music in Asia and Africa.

Ola Stockfelt points out in *Adequate modes of Listening*<sup>1</sup> that today, most industrialized Western nations are sharing a more or less homogeneous culture, which is musically dominated by "artistic music" from Europe and North America as well as Anglo-American pop music.

What about non-western nations, then ? Which culture(s) are they influenced by ? Are they still maintained under a post-colonial cultural yoke ? Is experimental music, and by extension noise music, a typically western kind of music ?

One has to go back as early as the end of the 19th century to discover the first Western traces of electric or electronic experimentation, or more generally music relying on noises ; they start developing at the beginning of the following century (Elisha Gray's musical telegraph, Thaddeus Cahill's telharmonium or dynamophone, William Duddell's singing arc, Luigi Russolo's experimentation (*Risveglio Di Una Città*), László Moholy-Nagy's various experimentation for gramophones, Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch's own experiments, Edgar Varese, Walter Ruttmann (*Wochenende*), John Cage (*Imaginary landscapes N°1*), and many more). Music featuring noises first belong to modern art in the beginning of the 20th century, particularly movements such as Futurism (Luigi Russolo) or Dadaism (Marcel Duchamp, Jefim Gollyscheff), and will develop later on, after the war, through the apparition of musique concrète, electronic music (from Pierre Schaeffer to Herbert Eimert, not forgetting Vladimir Ussachevski, Otto Luening or Eliane Radigue, etc.), and Fluxus (a movement through which some pioneers of experimental and pre-noise music from Asia express their ideas : Nam June Paik, Yasunao Tone, Takehisa Kosugi).

From the 1960s on, work based on sound, textures and noises spreads like wildfire to the point where it bursts out of academic, radiophonic, cinematographic and institutionalized spheres in order to pervade non-academic areas in the 1970s, thanks to such avant-garde artists as Stefan Weisser (aka Z'ev), Throbbing Gristle, White House, SPK, Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), Borbetomagus or even Lou Reed to name only a few.

At first sight, everything seems to have happened solely in the western world. And yet, in 1944, the first known piece of African so-called "experimental music" was recorded in Cairo. Halim El-Dabh came up with a composition originally named *Ta'abir al-Zaar*, later edited as a fragment under the moniker *Wire Recorder Piece*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Cox et Daniel Warner : Audio Culture - Reading In Modern Music, September 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Goran Vejvoda and Rob Young, *My concrete life* in *The Wire*, issue #258, August 2005.

Even if this work remains an African exception, it nonetheless proves that the origins of the very notion of *noise music* do not entirely belong to Western culture, but most probably stem from technology, modernization, and often urbanism, and it also outlines that judging from the context and the genesis of this composition, there was from the start a connection to noise which was truly personal to some non-western composers, in relation to their respective cultures because the intention is clearly to process sounds, noises, to distort music and ambiances in order to obtain new textures.

This was the case for electro-acoustic composers from the 1950s in Japan (Yasushi Akutagawa, Saburo Tominaga, Shiro Fukai, Toshiro Mayuzumi), in Israel (Josef Tal) and also in the 1960s in the same countries as well as in Iran (Alireza Mashayakhi) or in Indonesia (Slamet Abdur Sjukur) for instance, each of them drawing inspiration from their original musical culture. In fact, some artists haven't severed ties with their cultural environment but have instead used their local references through the use of modern technologies which is thus intended to become a global technology.

In this scheme of things, Japan is the first country to have quickly developed a true noise identity in the Eastern world, through two main noise currents : *japanoise*, an extreme and radical noise movement (Merzbow / Masami Akita, CCCC, Hijokaidan, Incapacitants, etc.) and *onkyōkei*, which concentrates on minimalism and clarity (Toshimaru Nakamura, Taku Sogimoto, Sashiko M, Otomo Yoshihide, etc.)

Japanese *noisicians* have probably been influenced, one way or another, by Gutai, a group of artists experimenting with several art forms throughout the 1950s, most of the time in an ephemeral manner – this ephemeral aspect is actually quite essential to noise music, in the sense that if noise is not recorded and reproduced with the use of a medium such as a tape, a disc, a computer, etc, it can never be played again in the exact same way it was performed the first time; noise is spontaneous, and self-destructive such as Dada, Gutai, more than jazz. "Gutai is a group of individuals who take possession of every conceivable technique or material, without limiting themselves to two or three dimensions, they even use liquids, solids, gas, or even sound and electricity"<sup>3</sup> ; this process of using just any available artifact in order to produce noise (instruments, metal, junk<sup>4</sup>, computers, recycled sounds, etc.), isn't it precisely typical of noise music, whether in Japan or anywhere else in the world ?

Yet, *Jikken Kōbō*, another movement originating in Japan which sees artists, poets and musicians develop multimedia projects (Jijo Yuasa, Minao Shibata, Tōru Takemitsu, etc)<sup>5</sup>, may very well have been at the origin of Japanese experimental and noise music, on top of the aforementioned Fluxus movement, the pioneers of 1950s

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<sup>3</sup> Motonaga Sadamasa, L'univers ne s'arrête à aucun moment..., in *Robho*, issues n°5-6, April 1971.

<sup>4</sup> For the Japanese, this reactivation of junk is notably a manner of fighting the dominant avant-garde from the western world, from which they are mostly excluded.

<sup>5</sup> Thom Holmes, *Electronic and experimental music: technology, music and culture*, New York, Routledge, 2002 (1985 for the 1<sup>st</sup> edition).

Japanese electronic music, and of course jazz, rock, psychedelic music, heavy metal, punk, and later grindcore.

But Japan is not an isolated case; it is definitely not the only country to have witnessed the growth of an experimental scene. This is why, from the 1980s on, although on a much smaller scale, a real noise scene, completely independent and non-academic, came to existence in countries such as Turkey (2/5 BZ) or Israel (Herzliyya Boardwalk String Sextet, Joseph Copolovich / Shlomo Artzi Orchestra); and later on in the 1990s and the 2000s, the same thing happened in most of the Asian countries as well as a part of Africa (mostly the North and the South).

Having at first experienced very little or no contact at all with Japan, this noise music often draws inspiration from European music. However, the Japanese noise epicenter has over time influenced other Asian as well as Western cultures : the Philippines (Radiosick), Singapore (Mindfuckingboy), Indonesia (Aneka Digital Safari), South Korea (Astronoise), China (Torturing Nurse), Malaysia (Goh Lee Kwang), Vietnam (Writher), Taiwan (Fujui Wang), Hong Kong (Orgasm Denial) – in the same way that at one point in history, Japan had fed on the neighbouring cultures<sup>6</sup>. Art travels, inspires, feeds, influences, and evolves.

Quite a few artists from the Far East have understandably sought inspiration from Japan or Australia rather than from the rest of the world, due to their geographical and historical situation. This results in an obvious influence of the Japanese scene on these countries. However, for the past decade, some scenes which managed to grow sufficiently or to reach a certain maturity, have been dissociating from the Japanese and Euro-American cultural folds, in order to reconnect with a local context within this global movement. This is notably the case in China, with the Sound Art scene – a pioneer of which is none other than poet and composer Yan Jun<sup>7</sup>, or in Indonesia, a country which has influenced western classical music as early as the 19th century (for instance, Debussy's use of the ostinato and the pedal) but also its own contemporary music from the 1960s on (Adhi Susanto and the gameltron<sup>8</sup>) and in the 21st century (composer Danif Pradana, aka Kalimayat, used kecak fragments in a radical noise music form).

In South Korea, Algeria, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Singapore, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt or South Africa, there are nowadays a number of noise musicians, or even noise scenes within which artists develop a modern identity, far remote from the Western world of Japan. What are the common points between these artists, what are their techniques and approaches, their differences, their singularities, their influences ? What innovations do they bring to the genre – since we all know

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<sup>6</sup> Sanshin, a musical instrument from China, is used in shima uta, a sort of Japanese music, which, on the island of Okinawa, uses a pentatonic scale identical to the one used in some parts of Indonesia.

<sup>7</sup> Clive Bell, Yan Jun, in *The Wire*, issue #311, January 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Gluck - Electronic Music in Indonesia, EMF Institute, 2006.

how art feeds on influences and exchanges (throughout the centuries, cultures have had a variety of links and connections, from simple exchange to total domination) ?

Noise is usually a violent emotional outburst (a wall of sound invading space, screams, tortured objects, the whole body being invested in the act), unless it relates to internal emotions, trance, or dreams. noise bears within a brutal, raw, primal aspect, like a child howling or beating objects with the intention of filling up space with deafening sounds. Noise, a primitive element which is common to the whole of mankind, is also a reflection of our society where everything has to be constantly faster, louder and more violent. Some people will try to free themselves by joining in the uproar, others will seek refuge in the isolationist vibrations of drone music, and others will try to counteract the vapid hypes of the pop music which has invaded the media. Since all of us are now part of a global world, and share a planet where everything is interconnected, a new form of modern culture seems to be developing beyond traditions or to be stemming from them, by digesting and incorporating them. This new entity, which noise performance is a part of, belongs to this whole new concept of *globalization*. But this globalization doesn't only possess western aspects. Globalization is not just the invasion of American fast-food restaurants, it is also the arrival of Chinese restaurants or pita-bars; it points to a variety of directions, all the while originating from a variety of epicenters. International companies are spreading like wildfire throughout the world ; they impose a certain uniformity, but also need to adapt. Even if they insist on maintaining this uniformity regardless of the country where the company settles, a supermarket, a brand of fast-food restaurants or a designer label often has to include some local cultural elements if they want to succeed. It is the same thing with global art or global music, including noise music.

There will always be some artists whose origin won't be identifiable due to the uniformity of culture and the globalization of modern technologies but in most cases, artists always end up blending in elements of their own culture to their compositions, intentionally or not. Noise music, even if it tends to use the common tools which are nowadays produced on an international level (such as effects racks microphones, magnetic tapes, software, electric guitars, etc), also manages to develop local techniques from the moment a local scene becomes important enough.

There are several examples of this. If onkyōkei is intimately linked to the Far East (minimalism, importance of silence and dynamics), it is possible to encounter it in Taiwan (Pei) as well as in Malaysia (Goh Lee Kwang). Numerous Chinese artists also develop their own notion of noise music, often in connection with their traditional musical structures, their sonic surroundings, whether urban or not, and / or by mixing electronics with field recordings (Yan Jun or 718, to only name two projects) ; this connection can also be found with other artists like Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng in Vietnam. Indeed noise is totally pervasive in this part of the world, be it the noise of extensive urbanisation, such as the sound of machines, cranes, vehicles, air-conditioning, or on the other hand the sound of animals, insects, or leaves producing a relentless racket, a veritable sonic blanket or even a wall. Silence and plenitude don't exist, and it is from this mass of sounds that the contemporary Asian noise scene is born.

Some other artists are influenced by local traditional music or by their everyday life. For instance, Kalimayat in Indonesia, or in Japan Yamakawa Fuyuki and his performances for guitar, heartbeat and throat singing, Osman Arabi in Lebanon with his Larsen and distortion combined with oriental rhythms, Dirar Kalash in Palestine or Nepalos (Rheda Moula) in Algeria, whose noise music includes samples evocative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 2/5 BZ in Turkey and his collages of urban and traditional music, noise, and a variety of media reminiscent of a middle-eastern Negativland, Hassan Khan and his saturated traditional percussions sometimes smothered in noise, sometimes smothering the sonic mass, Victor Gama in Angola with his *pangeia instrumentos* inspired from Angolese traditions and his references to the current political situation of his country, Li Chin Wei in Taiwan and his work on interactive vocal performance between himself and the audience, in relation to prayer and ritual, Li Chin Sung Trio based in Mongolia and in Hong Kong, with their blending of noise and Mongolian music, Yan Jun and his compositions mixing throat singing, singing bowls, field recordings and electronics, the list goes on and on.

Be it through the work of the aforementioned pioneers or through the first festivals (in Indonesia with the Young Composers Festival in 1969 in Yogyakarta, in Iran with the Shiraz Festival in 1972), Asian experimental music - as well as African experimental music to a lesser degree - has managed to be present and active from the early beginnings, but has unfortunately largely been ignored by music specialists and historians. This can be explained by multiple political, social, and economic factors. It clearly appears nowadays that this experimental practice took a certain time to develop, without losing any of its originality in the process – in fact it is quite the opposite.

There are more and more initiatives throughout the world, be it festivals, cultural centers or projects: *Unyazi* (South Africa), *101 Copies* (Egypt, Jordan), *Sounding Beijing Festival*, *Musicacoustica Festival*, *2Pi Festival*, *Mini Midi* (China), *Green Space* (Vietnam), *Irtijal* (Lebanon), *The UnifiedField*, *The Future Sounds Of Folk*, *Yogyakarta Contemporary Music Festival* (Indonesia), *Sound Pocket Festival* (Hong Kong), *SABAW*, *ASEUM* (Philippines). They all share this need to promote contemporary, experimental, improvised or noise music, and each initiative proves that it is possible for contemporary music to have a regional identity, all the while signifying that it is also possible to absorb traditional music within experimentation (for instance, *The Future Sounds of Folk*), and that new art forms relating to one or several local cultures have become a reality<sup>9</sup>.

To conclude, and despite the common belief, there exist significantly growing singularities within noise and experimental music, outside of the western world. Claiming that this is merely plagiarism would reduce most artists around the world to the status of bland imitators. Because generally speaking, why would European musicians have any right to play jazz, or Australians blues, when those genres are rooted in such remote and specific cultures ? African or Asian noise scenes being

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<sup>9</sup> June Yap, Global Ear : Yogyakarta, in *The Wire*, issue # 318, August 2010.

relatively young, it is only natural for them to invent themselves according to well-established sources, and to claim the need for role-models. And this doesn't tarnish the originality of these scenes which, even though they haven't yet reached maturity, have nonetheless begun to stray away from the usual Western references.

Paul Gauguin stated that "*Art is either plagiarism or revolution*". But why would anyone be allowed to criticize the emerging countries, when most Western artists have been repeating themselves for decades ?

Could this outline the dread of dishonour, and the fear for the Western world to have to give way to an ever-changing global world, thus abandoning the dominant position it has managed to maintain throughout history ?

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Written by C-drík Fermont, previously published in French by Les presses du réels in the book *Le performatiel noise*, edited by Sébastien Biset, 2010.

Text slightly reviewed and corrected.

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English translation by Alpin César.

