

Joanna Demers

Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music.

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Listening Through the Noise does not argue for the historical importance of experimental electronic music. It does not list and rank particular compositions or recordings for being artistically superior or canonical. Somewhat surprisingly, the book does not attempt to provide a singular theory or set of conditions for the aesthetics of the genre. What seems to be the purpose of this work, rather, is to supply the foundational information concerning origins, materials, ideas, styles and examples of experimental electronic music, so that readers can proceed as individuals to develop their own unique experiences with this specific form of art. The result is a guidebook designed for the traveler who wants to grab a backpack and explore some remote corners of the earth, but who lacks the confidence to set off alone. By providing an introduction to the language and a map of the essential framework, a little comfort starts to develop, allowing the adventurer to proceed in a way that is simultaneously guided and free.

Since this is way I think this book ought to be read, I recommend starting out by perusing the glossary (which is where I began). At some point in the last century, to really have knowledge of a musical style came to mean knowing the names and the sonic distinctions between all of that style's sub-genres. A quick conversation with somebody interested in any type of music usually turns into a delicate navigation of its numerous divisions. Realistically, one can't discuss experimental music as a whole, only the subsets of, e.g., 'harsh noise', 'free improvisation', 'electro-acoustic composition', and endless others. In fact, most connoisseurs go even deeper, breaking down any one of those subsets into even more specific sub-categories. Demers is not only aware of this, but really tries to make sense of how what might seem like a very subtle aspect of the music could ultimately be responsible for what label it falls under. The glossary provides short explanations of the meta-genres discussed in the book as well as their aural signifiers. These types of definitions always seem to bring about plenty of head-butting and hair-splitting from both fans and artists. Demers addresses such objections directly by apologizing for the glossary's brevity and referring readers to other books which go into greater detail describing the terminology. This modesty is refreshing, but it also detracts from the validity of what I found to be very clear and succinct entries. It must be extremely difficult to place a set of conditions around something like 'drone music', let alone defining 'aesthetics' in five sentences (and doing a very good job of both).

In addition to providing ground level knowledge of the differences between calling a song 'acid house' or 'house' music, these category descriptions introduce an interesting philosophical question: does labeling a work of art necessarily attach a value to it? Is stating that a particular track *is* a techno song at the same time stating something

about its importance or its position in an artistic hierarchy? Demers argues around this issue throughout the book and finally faces the question directly near the end, maintaining that ‘genre is, after all, a mechanism for practitioners to maintain the value or quality of an art form’ (137).

This position is also utilized in Demers’ discussions on why experimental musicians within ‘the academy’ sometimes shun outsiders by calling their work dance music or underground music. The inverse is never mentioned, but I assume that plenty of people creating electronic music have no desire to be referred to as ‘scholarly’.

The academic side of experimental electronic music is discussed throughout, but the individual musicians involved in the genre are given less attention in the author’s examples. Name-dropping is a necessary aspect of music writing. It wouldn’t make much sense to describe micro-genres without providing a name or list of names to match it. Demers does a wonderful job of including references to artists from a fairly wide variety of contemporary electronic music. Fennesz, Juan Atkins, William Basinski, Girl Talk and Kim Cascone are discussed in depth while many others, such as Kevin Drumm, Jim O’Rourke, Merzbow and Matmos appear briefly as touchstones. Big names from earlier electronic eras (Cage, Xenakis, Stockhausen) are mentioned throughout the book, although they predate the post-1980 period on which Demers focuses.

Other writers dealing with this subject have often argued that the development of these musical forms is inseparable from the development of the electronics used to create them. This leads to the misconception that experimental electronic music is primarily concerned with the utilization of technology. While Demers certainly agrees that changes in technology are pivotal—her post-1980 focus is based on the availability of affordable synthesizers—she more strongly associates these works with a focus on the sounds themselves. From field recordings to magnetic tape, from analog synthesis to sampling, the common aesthetic is the creation or utilization of new sounds. Strange sounds, either previously unheard or at least unheard in a musical context, connect these seemingly diverse genres to a singular experiment. In this way, the aesthetic judgment of the listener can be based on how the qualities of these sounds are valued.

In the section titled ‘Sign’ there is some excellent, yet subtle advice concerning the role of the listener. Performance is explained not as the playing of a musical instrument, but as ‘musicians giving a public rendering of music’ (41). This makes it much easier to include non-traditional instrumentation such as turntables, effects pedals or laptops, often found in electronic music. Another example is the author’s suggestion that experimental sounds are best handled by what she calls ‘listening descriptions’. Instead of relying on the rhetorical language of critique, the first thing to do is just to try to describe what it is one is hearing. This allows some of the stranger pieces of electronic music to be discussed for what they actually sound like, so that they are not simply dismissed for not sounding like other music.

The philosophy of sound, then, is an underlying idea at work, both in this book and in many electronic compositions themselves. Sounds are talked about here as objects

that can be manipulated, cloned or destroyed. They are the smallest units in any deconstruction of music. However, according to Demers, sounds as objects cannot possess an aesthetic value of their own. Sounds do not have any inherent meaning. This creates an odd space. If sounds are not merely noises, and they are not signifiers of meaning, what are they? If the role of sounds is of special importance in looking at experimental electronic music, an explanation of what it is about such sounds that people enjoy and appreciate is needed.

For example, feedback-based ‘noise music’ is described as being about texture, negation and horror. This is a wonderfully clarifying frame in which to place these sounds. However, that description is followed up by the clarification that the author makes no claims about the aesthetic merit of such works. Styles and genres are explained, discussed, and given some historical context. They are never ranked or judged. Throughout the book, outright subjective claims are either transparently placed or clearly labeled as such, avoiding too much over-generalization or cold relativism. The songs singled out for review are not chosen because they are essential. Demers creates a playlist to accompany your reading that really serves to exemplify best the points being made. That said, I not only enjoyed the recordings provided on the companion website, but I found myself taking suggestions from the discography at the end of the book and adding some new items to my own music library.

This last detail may be what the book is best used for: not just as a list of good music to check out, but as a way to bring together extraordinarily diverse artists in a way that allows each work to help support the next. Seemingly distant genres, like IDM and noise, can be connected and understood as having both a similar ancestry and a common set of tools to work from. This creates a desire to re-examine a wide variety of music, both old and new, with a fresh set of ideas and an expanded concept of their forms and foundations. Argumentation and analytic debates get pushed far away in favor of doing what musical aesthetics arguably does best: creating informed and appreciative listeners.

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