

Playdoyer for Painful Sound
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The experience of music --especially of *new* music-- as painful, indeed as torturous, is hardly new. One finds a fascinating historical catalogue of such reactions to music in Nicholas Slonimsky's remarkable *Lexicon of Musical Invective; Critical Assaults on Composers since Beethoven's Time*, originally published in 1953 and happily still in print today (W.W. Norton & Co, 2000). As a quick glance at the aptly named "Invecticon" found at the back of this volume reveals, the response to music as torture has a long history which is by no means reserved for what we today would term "difficult" music. Here are two of the numerous examples, the first being the response of the critic of the *New York Musical Courier* on November 9, 1904 to a performance of Mahler's 4th Symphony:

The writer of the present review frankly admits that . . . to him it was one hour or more of the *most painful musical torture* to which he has been compelled to submit. [Slonimsky,120]

A few decades later the term appears again in Adolf Diesterweg account of Alban Berg's *Wozzek* in the *Zeitschrift für Musik* (Berlin) in January 1926:

One cannot imagine, without having lived through the dissonant orgy of *Wozzeck*, the downright murderous demands on the voice, the ear torture to which the poor singers and the members of the State Opera Orchestra were subjected in rehearsal after rehearsal. [Slonimsky, 55]

What can we learn from Slonimsky's archive of powerfully negative reactions to a wide range of different kinds of music over such a long period of time? Does it simply confirm the well-known insight of reception-history that music which today hardly seems threatening was often once perceived as difficult, indeed, if we are to take the critics at their hyperbolic word, as truly painful? One need only recall the famous case of the tritone or augmented fourth interval which was virtually synonymous with dissonance starting in the Middle Ages (indeed it was referred to as the *diabolus in musica* in the 18th-century) but later became a completely benign and acceptable interval with the advent of Baroque classical music.

Yet one might object that when critics refer to music as 'torture' it is clearly a *rhetorical* device, in no way comparable to the very "real" practices of sonic violence which have recently made the issue of 'musical torture' a matter of urgent political controversy. Nevertheless, this detour through the history of musical invective **is** in fact relevant for what it can teach us about the modes of production and consumption of music today. As Susan McClary puts it most succinctly, in her "Afterward" to *Noise*, Jacques Attali's famous 1978 study of what he calls "the Political Economy of Music":

If the noise of classical music (portrayals of the irrational in Bach, the Promethean struggles of Beethoven, the bitter irony and agonizing doubt of Mahler) is no longer audible, it is because it has been contained by a higher act of violence. To refuse to enact the ruptures of a discontinuous musical surface is to silence forcibly, to stifle the human voice, to render docile by means of lobotomy. It is this mode of performance that characterizes our concert halls and recordings today. It leads us to believe that there never was meaning, that music always has been nothing but pretty, orderly sound.[Attali, *Noise*: 152]

What McClary reminds us here is that in our contemporary *inability* or unwillingness to hear what is difficult or even truly painful in music, something important may have been lost. Might something significant --a kind of (negative?) knowledge-- reside in the very pain, the real violence of certain acoustic practices? For those wondering what might mean to "enact the ruptures of a discontinuous musical surface" I would suggest listening to a recording of the late Beethoven string quartets played according to composer's own metronome markings (which most musicians to this day simply dismiss as "impossible" or crazy). This is extremely harsh music *even today* --one can imagine how truly mad it must have sounded like when it was first composed (consult Slonimsky if you want to get a concrete idea).

If a capacity to listen to music *even when it is painful* marks one end of a spectrum of historical listening practices, then the other end might be characterized by a relation to sound that, rejecting entirely any claim of music to cognition, simply enlists sound as a technology of mood management. What began in the 1930s as a corporate project known as Muzak (the attempt to maximize worker productivity through a carefully programmed sonic environment --think "elevator music") has today become a ubiquitous practice

of mp3 'playlists' tailored to serve the purposes of specific moods, activities and places. Different playlists on our mp3 players are used to maintain a certain pace during exercise at the gym, to "relax" after work, etc. We also come across the notion of the playlist in numerous accounts of the recent episodes of sonic torture, the term used to designate the deeply idiosyncratic catalogue of *what* exactly was played – Eminem, Britney Spears, Limp Biskit, Metallica, and (oddly enough) Rage against the Machine, Bruce Springsteen ("Born in the USA") and, (astonishingly) Barney the Dinosaur's "I love You," and other selections from Sesame Street. Leaving aside the various complex issues that this raises --was this in fact a kind of programming; if so, who was doing it and how is one to read its ideological agenda?-- it also seems pretty clear that at some level it did not really matter *what* was being played, just *how loud and how long*. But the fact and the contingent character of the playlist ought to give us pause –reminiscent as it is of the randomizing character of the "shuffle" command that is one of the signature features of our ipod playlist episteme. For what the shuffle command indicates about the current state of listening is that it simply does not matter what we are listening to, as long as the "song" (to use the generic designation that no longer necessarily refers to anything vocal) is part of whatever "playlist" we have chosen. The choice of that playlist is *instrumental* and *not* in the musical sense of the term but in the sense of *instrumental reason*. But once we have institutionalized that instrumental logic of the playlist –as opposed to other types of listening cultures—is it really all that great a leap to imagine a playlist that simply serves other ends –such as torture? Might this be one way to respond to the important challenge Suzanne Cusick raises (in her important essay "*You are in a place that is out of the world . . .*": *Music in the Detention Camps of the "Global War on Terror"*) when she asks

"how have apparently civilian musical and acoustical practices affected music's and sound's weaponization? How have these musical practices contributed to the aesthetic, psychological, and technical conditions that have enabled the substantial proportion of our population who have served in the military to think of music this way, despite an official musical culture that pretends to think of music as primarily a medium for entertainment or apolitical aesthetic pleasures?" [*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2008): 2:1, p.4]

This is not at all to trivialize real suffering, but to insist instead that the terrifying fact of sonic violence demands that we confront what may be some painful questions about the general state of listening today.