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## Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature by David Rothenberg

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## Book Review

### ***Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature***

David Rothenberg  
University of Georgia Press, 2002  
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#### **Reviewed by Marcela Echeverri**

*Sudden Music* is a book David Rothenberg wrote to tell stories about his journeys around the world, learning to listen alongside people he met during these travels. He tells stories of chance, musical instruments and technology, written and non-written music, language, and embeddedness, reflecting upon ideas such as how to find the “perfect sound” and how different traditions around the world practice their instruments in order to do something meaningful. He defies conceptions of music as language and the notion that music always has a beginning, middle, and end. He wonders whether there is a type of sound that can contain all sounds and whether there is a world that can contain all worlds. He also touches on how technology mediates sound making and the possibilities it holds for aesthetic and creative music development.

At the heart of Rothenberg’s book is his personal experience of music as a lifestyle and his constant search for meaning. He reflects upon his search for meaning through practices such as playing the clarinet and learning how to play the Tibetan *gyaling*, a “conical-bore instrument with a double reed that is always played in pairs” (9).

*Sudden Music* brings the reader to reflect upon the tension that exists between improvisation and the written word. Using written language, Rothenberg tries to make his book resemble a spoken narrative or an ethereal improvised music piece. He emphasizes how, in his music, he tries to play sounds that cannot be scored. Nevertheless, there is a tension between this intention and his aim to produce books that predominantly contain written language:

Accidental meaning is essential for improvisation, because we are never fully in control. When we don’t know where the order of the work is coming from, wonderful surprises can result. The stories that matter the most, which are often never written down, evolve and recombine in memory so thoroughly that the truth becomes hard after a generation to pin down. (13)

This reference addresses random encounters in life, improvised friendships, and accepting whatever there is to take from unexpected events and the unknown. It suggests that stories are meant to be transformative and that memory exists to enhance creativity. Interestingly, Rothenberg also warns the reader about the risk of thinking too much when it comes to chance and storytelling. Furthermore, he points out the risk of becoming repetitive in the search for perfection. One tension in this discourse is that Rothenberg presents non-written spontaneous music as a protagonist in his book, while simultaneously, throughout two chapters, reflecting on musical practices that focus on playing a single sound over and over until the quality and intention are reached. This statement suggests that repetition can be thought of as an endless endeavour as well as a dangerous action that can lead to falling into a non-creative state of mind, reflecting an unaddressed tension between the acts of being spontaneous and being repetitive.

In the chapter “One Note History,” for instance, Rothenberg reflects on the repetition of a single note as an admirable practice that some musicians around the world have performed as their main exercise. In making this claim, Rothenberg leaves several pertinent questions unaddressed: Is repetition the path towards spontaneity? Is it about producing meaningful sounds or about surprise in the constant creation of music? Is repetition without thought what he refers to as spontaneity? These unaddressed questions beg further reflection on the definitions of music and improvisation more generally. Rothenberg makes it clear that he is constantly searching for meaning, and this tension seems to demonstrate how he is using this book as a means of trying to identify *how to create* in a meaningful manner.

Another tension in this work arises when Rothenberg states that music is not language, it is not meant to be understood, but felt, and it does not necessarily need to have a structure. While these descriptors outline what Rothenberg does *not* consider music to be (e.g., it is not language), he fails to offer a definition of what music *is*. Contrary to Rothenberg’s statement, one could argue that music can indeed be language. Music can be a form of communication that expresses emotion, much like facial expressions and body language. When one listens to a language they do not understand, one can interpret it as music, but this does not mean that it is no longer language. Perception of language can be informed by semantic understanding, but it does not provide a complete picture. Likewise, emotional connection to music is only one of several aspects to consider. Western music involves notation, words, symbols, structures, and terms that can be understood as language. Even though Rothenberg is not referring to Western music when he speaks of music, there is still no framing in the book for how he would define it. Some forms of music might be more distant from our conceptions of language than others, but it is key to identify the framework through which one refers to music. What *is* music and what *is not* music are questions that Rothenberg provokes in the reader but does not manage to answer effectively.

For Rothenberg, music, sound, nature, and machines are all part of an entanglement of agencies that work alongside chance as a series of events that allow creativity, surprise, and life itself to happen. Music, for Rothenberg, can be produced by a diversity of elements; it can come from birds, whales, trees, wind, water, fire, cars, planes, synthesizers, and electronic and acoustic instruments. This reflects John Cage’s notion that music is not so much about what is played, but more about what is listened to: “wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments” (Cage 3).

In “A Sense of a Soundscape,” Rothenberg argues that humans perceive themselves as being removed from the natural world, declaring his own personal desire and endeavour to fit in to the natural world again. He insists that there is a need to raise awareness of the surrounding world. He references R. Murray Schafer’s well-established concept of “soundscape,” describing this term from a visual perspective—as inescapable for us as the landscapes that enable us to stand out from and also be a part of them (46). Schafer’s proposition involves a specific sense of aesthetics in which there are desirable and undesirable sounds. For Schafer, nature sounds should be preserved, and machine sounds should disappear. However, in Rothenberg’s interpretation, there is no dichotomy between nature and machine, music and nature, humans and the world. Rothenberg agrees with Schafer’s concept of not being able to escape a soundscape. Yet, he seeks to explore sounds as separate from the source that produces them. Rothenberg states that throughout listening experiments, he has come to discover that often it is impossible to distinguish a sound made by a human-made machine from one made among bugs:

We will not survive as artists or as a species if we cannot become part of the world that surrounds us. There should be no duality between music and nature. Natural sound is never separable from human sound. The moment we decide to listen, to seek out meaning, we start to change the world. We cannot preserve that sound world apart from our listening, nor can we make music without sensing its resonance in an environment, be it a concert hall, a bedroom, a car, a bar or a windy bluff out in the rain. (90)

This chapter also states that space is vital for sound to develop. Rothenberg argues that space can be physical or digital. He claims that digitally modified sounds can evoke a variety of spaces, echoes, and reverberations different to the place where the sounds are being listened to. One can be at a library listening to music through headphones, close their eyes, and imagine they are in a place as big as a canyon or as intimate as a small room, depending on the music. In this case, Rothenberg defends sound recording and digitally modified sounds as tools for listeners to transport themselves to distant places.

Furthermore, Rothenberg reflects on the potential technology has to transform the way in which humans listen to music. Keeping in mind that this book was published in 2002, Rothenberg refers to an interface in which the composer can choose a series of parameters that set the tone for how they want their music to sound, but it is up to the listener to play within those parameters, making a certain composition sound different every time a listener plays it on their computer. He presents this as a tool that will allow the composer to release control of their piece, giving a machine the ability to improvise. This concept is reminiscent of Bruno Latour's depiction of a creator:

As powerful as one might imagine a creator, he will never be capable of better controlling his creations than the puppeteer her puppets, a writer her notebooks, a cigarette its smoker, a speaker her language. He can make them do something but he cannot make them: to launch a cascade of irreversible events, yes; to be master of his tools, no. (Latour 65)

With this idea, Rothenberg aims to raise awareness of improvisation as a surprising act that can come from any source, not necessarily human:

What artist wants to give up control to a machine that cannot think for itself? Remember, though: even though it can't think, it can help us create flexible worlds that will continue to surprise us, help us flow. It's not going to be easy, it's not here yet. Art is not like a game of chess that can be won according to a list of rules. (178)

Rothenberg hopes that musical instruments and technologies will be invisible but enabling. He aims for his art to be embedded in the world and for his music to have no beginning or end. His quest is a quest for the self and the world to be dissolved, for humans to feel like they are in the world and not divided from it. As he explains:

I would also like to stick to instruments that would let me forget about the self. For that is key: the idea that art is not about expressing the self, but about expressing something larger than the self, a way toward fitting in with the natural world that belies the human sense of separateness, inadvertence, and doubt. (186)

As Rothenberg states, humans have a "sense" of distinctiveness from the rest of the world, and in my opinion, it is only that: a sense, a perception. The idea that humans are not embedded in—and part of—the world is a notion that can be changed through awareness, and, as

Rothenberg would put it, through listening: listening as a way of staying in the present moment and acknowledging the self and the surroundings as one. While *Sudden Music* discusses sounds, listening, playing, and practice, it is more broadly about inviting humans to find their place in the world as ingrained elements of a series of events, agencies, relations, and sounds that are inherently governed by chance.

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