

**Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Nicola Spelman.**  
***Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music.* New York:**  
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popular culture, and a convincing argument for the role of psychology and life history dynamics within the field of musicology. *Torment Saint* is a remarkable contribution to the limited research on Smith and stands as the definitive book on the musician. It is strongly recommended for musicology scholars with special interest in lyricism, music composition, and artist biography, but its language and themes are accessible to interest a wide audience.

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MATTHEW RYAN SMITH

Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Nicola Spelman. *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 375 pp. ISBN 978-1-4411-5937-3.

*Resonances* grew out of the University of Salford's 2010 conference, "Bigger than Words, Wider than Pictures: Noise, Affect, Politics." Along with its sibling collection, *Reverberations* (2012), *Resonances* joins the proliferation of monographs and collections published recently that look at the subject of noise in various cultural fields.<sup>1</sup> As part of an exciting line of publications on music from Bloomsbury, this collection is populated by essays from a mix of scholars and artists who offer a range of perspectives on noise in current musics and, to a lesser extent, on the ways in which current musics relate to the potential expansion of noise as a concept. To do justice to each of the nineteen essays would require much more space than is afforded here; I will approach the collection by thinking about some productive points of tension that emerge—what might be called the collection's noise. This emphasis on noise is in no way a dismissal of what is, overall, a compelling and valuable collection that brings marginalized musics to the fore.

The dynamics of noise and the ways it can operate allow for infinitely different lines of inquiry, because what its definitions attempt to fix constantly evade such static meanings—this slippage is itself a type of noise. Put simply, the term does what it says. Taking the work of Jacques Attali's seminal *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), Douglas Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), and Paul Hegarty's *Noise/Music: A History* (2007) as forebears, the editors open the collection by working through some possible definitions of noise, such as how contemporary histories of Western music are concerned with its role in marking music versus non-music, or the

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<sup>1</sup> A sample of other titles on noise: Haigne (2013), Krapp (2011), Nunes (2012), and Schwartz (2011). Another prominent example is the conference "Noise in and as Music," 4–6 October 2013 at the University of Huddersfield, organized by Aaron Einbond and Aaron Cassidy, accompanied by the publication of a collection by the same name.

trend in recording technologies towards noise reduction (4). Noise understood as an unwanted element—whether in terms of the studio, composition, performance, or discourse—centres on the idea of fidelity, or the degree of exactness with which something is copied or reproduced. Questions of fidelity or the limits that define noise against not-noise inevitably ask us to consider ideas of mediation, because noise is not a thing in itself but an artifact of relations. To think about the degree of clarity of a relation (fidelity) and how (or through what) the relations between entities are carried out is crucial to any understanding of noise as what cannot be received or understood, forcing an excess of relations—mediation and fidelity thus go hand in hand.<sup>2</sup> The many ways noise is presented in the collection offer a rich means of thinking about mediation: Stephen Mallinder, a founding member of the art rock group Cabaret Voltaire, looks at embedding non-musical sounds and/or noise in pop music and film in “Sounds Incorporated”; Erich Hertz’s chapter treats mediation in the turntablism of Philip Jeck and Adorno; David Cecchetto and eldritch Priest’s chapter thinks about how concentration on certain musics, a form of mediation, can condition one to listen away through boredom to the affective content of music; and Alexis Paterson’s “Sound Barriers” considers mediation in terms of silence’s potential as a frame for contemporary music.

Fewer chapters deal explicitly with fidelity, leaving the reader to infer what precisely constitutes noise along the way. Jonathan Sterne’s work offers an external example of how fidelity could be thought of or applied.<sup>3</sup> Sterne shows that ideas surrounding noise reduction are more complex than simply removing noise from the signal; at the heart of any attempt at noise reduction lies the desire for a transparent or vanishing medium that can provide a pure and unmediated signal, a sonic connectivity without noise. Though far from exhausted, this desire has been questioned from many perspectives, throughout the last century or more of thinking. Sterne shows how the concept of fidelity itself is formed through shifting cultural forces rather than being inherently understood or given in the world. Fidelity—what constitutes communication verses non-communication, a signal received and understood—is presupposed in any discussion of noise, and yet, more often than not, the concept remains silent by omission or assumption. With scholars in media studies and elsewhere asking questions about fidelity and mediation (which open into discussions about the relation between original and copy), their absence is a palpable lack in a collection so deeply tied to audio reproduction technology. An interesting and wholly other approach to questions about mediation and fidelity is taken by the archive of images by Julie R. Kane, featured in the collection. These photos of noise music gigs seek to explore noise’s etymological link to nausea, what is happening at the gigs as well as the emotions of those present, in an attempt to reconstruct the music through visual aspects of the event (153).

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<sup>2</sup> Influence should be acknowledged from a wonderful group of texts by Michel Serres that think about noise in a multiplicity of registers (1995, 2007, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Sterne (2003, 2012).

The editors lay out three goals for the collection that are taken up in four sections titled “Noise, Rock, and Psychedelia,” “Punk Noise: Prehistories and Continuums,” “Noise, Composition, and Improvisation,” and “Approaching Noise Musics.” The first goal, “to assemble an overview of the noise foundations of contemporary popular music” (5), can be found in Seb Robert’s thinking of the ties between American noise music and Pentecostalism, Sheila Whiteley’s look at sixties rock, Benjamin Halligan’s examination of the affective dimensions of psychedelic noise in the genre of “shoegaze” with groups such as My Bloody Valentine, and Joseph Tham’s search for a historical continuum for noise music in industrial music. The second—to reach an expanded sense of sonic aesthetics using close analysis of noise music texts to develop an understanding of their technological, compositional, and performance practices (5)—is exemplified through Christopher Haworth’s “Xenakian Sound Synthesis: Its Aesthetics and Influence on ‘Extreme’ Computer Music,” which looks at applications of Xenakis’s synthesis techniques in the work of Florian Hecker as an archetype to trace the genealogy of the forenamed sub-genre; Jennifer Shryane’s exploration of “Stairwells of Abjection and Screaming Bodies: Einstürzende Neubauten’s Artaudian Noise Music”; Nicola Spelman’s “Recasting Noise: The Lives and Times of *Metal Machine Music*,” which questions Lou Reed’s work’s status as singular cultural object by tracking its birth in the studio, transcription and re-presentation by an acoustic ensemble, and Reed’s formation of a trio to explore the first iterations techniques in concert, thirty-three years after the album’s initial release; and George McKay’s expansion of performance practice to deal with how the loud aesthetics of excess found in pop and rock musics can have crippling capacities. The third goal—to recover *déclassé* forms of contemporary music that renounce artistic-subjective expression and the elevation of the individual, typically by replacing the human with the computer (5)—is achieved through the treatment of minor or marginalized musics that forms the majority of the collection. A noteworthy example is Marie Thompson’s chapter, which considers the role of gendered bodies in any liberatory political agenda and their potential to disrupt through noise.

Given this emphasis on marginal musics, the relation between popular and contemporary classical musics within the collection is at times unclear, even at odds. For example, the editors treat Beatlemania as noise meeting noise—their noisy sound meeting the noise of their audience, and the noise of moral commentators—and as a progressive sonic-aesthetic assault on current conceptions of art and the “elected silence” of the audience, an assault they think remains current (3). But this assault seems misdirected and long lost because it conflates differences between “classical” and “popular” concert spaces and the corresponding audience tendencies between musics, while disregarding countless attacks on concert etiquette. This conflation points to the collection’s lack of context or historical precedents. Its historical blinders (outside of the “long now” of modernity) block productive questions. How and when were these conceptions of art under assault formed? When did audiences stop thinking of concerts as social spaces, and when were the lights dimmed to facilitate focused sites of listening and concentration? Understandably, the collection

operates with the contemporary as its scope, but scope does not always need to neuter history.

The editors aspire to get beyond existing methods, summarized as the melodic, harmonic, and biographic analysis of musicology, the literary-lyric analysis of popular music studies, or the mobilization of socio-cultural frames found in critical musicology and (although not mentioned by the editors) ethnomusicology (6). Their desired method can be positioned within a wider shift in the humanities seeking means of treating the materiality of, and implication in, things (in this case, what the music sounds like and where it takes place).<sup>4</sup> The chapter that most explicitly seeks this method is Rafael Sarpa's "Noise as Material Impact," which considers the *possibility* of a material investigation of sound in relation to noise music.<sup>5</sup> However, these glimpses are few and far between, and a lot of work remains before a new method is achieved. The methodological divisions between *Resonances* and its sister collection—that is, its consideration of noise and contemporary music and *Reverberations* on the philosophy, politics, and aesthetics of noise—leave much of what is considered here without historical context or theoretical interaction with wider related issues and trends. My point is not to critique the authors for something they aren't attempting to do, but to suggest that the collection can still do what it does while looking beyond itself. An example of an approach that could facilitate a broader dialogue is noise understood as interruption, which leads to its entry in cybernetics in the twentieth century (the science of communication and automatic control systems in both machines and living things). If music's role in music studies is understood as a theoretical matrix for music itself, as the editors suggest in the first footnote, then much of what can be said of music and its relations to the larger world remains obscured by the unattainable desire for a pure object without noise.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the collection has a lot to offer those thinking about noise in/of music in both twentieth- and twenty-first century musics (in the form of history as well as practice) and noise in its many guises.

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<sup>4</sup> See: Coole and Frost (2010), Braun and Whatmore (2010), or Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare* (2009), which Sarpa draws on, is an excellent example of new ways of thinking materialism in relation to sound.

<sup>6</sup> "Mattin's approach to noise is not from the theoretical standpoints, let alone genres, of contemporary music" (326).

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