The Condition of Muzak

Nick Groom

Muzak

Muzak, in performance:

“[I] like that, Gordon, turn it up.”

—Performance

Although Joseph Lanza has already written a book on the films of Nic Roeg (Fragile Geometry), he doesn't even mention the film Performance in Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy Listening, and other Moodsong. But it's there, nonetheless:

HARRY: I can rely on him. I can't say more than that, can I?

... 

HARRY: Fourteen thousand quid, we offer.

MOODY: I call that equitable.

HARRY: Three grand a week that boy's grossing, or I'm a communist.

Harry Flowers is listening to the Muzak on Location Service while discussing with his bent legal advisor and queer cronies how best to "merge" Joey Maddocks's betting shop with their dodgy gangland firm: "he's been invited to join our associated group of companies, my son." They consider the best way to "nudge" him: "I don't send them solicitors' letters," explains Chas Devlin, Harry's star performer, "I apply a bit of pressure." Joey is "nudged," has his shop "redecorated" by Mad Cyril and the Brown Boys, and is taken over by the Flowers racket: "You're on the firm now, Joey, one of my own. United we stand, divided we're lumbered. Took over? No, Joey. The word is merged. You was merged, my son. To old England."
Later in the film the decadent rock-star-turned-recluse Turner, in whose basement Chas takes refuge after shooting Maddocks, plays out a surreal fantasy. As Chas watches transfixed, Turner metamorphoses into Flowers, becomes curioiser and curioiser and queerer and queerer, strips the gangsters stark naked, and sings the Glimmer Twins' "Memo from Turner": "Do you call that equitable? I like that: turn it up."

Which is precisely what Lanza is doing in *Elevator Music*—he is turning up what shouldn't be heard: turning up Muzak, turning up history, tuning in, turning up, and sounding out. Applying a bit of pressure.

For Lanza, the significance of background music—"elevator music," Muzak—is in its pervasiveness; its very ubiquity makes it invisible; this invisibility provokes scorn. He has ambitions for Muzak, rooting out its history in order to position it in the annals of popular culture. This is nothing new. When Samuel Pepys amassed his 1,800 ballads at the end of the 17th century, among other things he was building an archive of the popular background and incidental music of the Restoration—indeed some of Pepys's ballads were themselves strings of catches, street calls, and hawkers' cries spliced together to give the effect of a stroll through a London street market, a drift through the city:

I Pray now listen to this Song,
   It is of Cries that you may hear,
As you the Streets may pais along,
   In London City e'ery year;
As you do walk them up and down,
   These are the Cries of London Town.
Fin Oranges and Lemmons fair,
   they are as good as e'er was cut...
Here's Artichokes and Cucumbers
   Colliflowers fresh and gay ...
Have you any old Brass to mend?
   a Kettle? Skellet? Frying-pan? here ...
Will you have any Milk to day? ... 
Here's honest Codpiece Points and Pins ... 
Old Sutes and Cloaks, or Taffety? ...
I am a Chimney-sweeper Black ... 
Here's knives to grind, here's knives to grind ...
Come buy a Steel, or a Tinder-Box.

*(City Rambler 334)*
A century later, Thomas Percy was able to capitalize on the sentimental bourgeois nostalgia for English popular songs in his three-volume *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), in which he realized the literary ambitions of balladry by presenting nicely edited examples, spiced with antiquarian annotation, and elegantly printed for the reading (rather than the listening) public. Percy’s *Reliques* proved to be a seminal work.

Two centuries on, the justification for studying Muzak mirrors that of 17th- and 18th-century ballad scholars: Joseph Lanza quotes Bruce MacLeod, “Complain as we may about its blandness and ability to manipulate, it is inextricably bound up in the social fabric of our times” (4). Because it’s there—because it has been placed—it becomes important. This is true even for peddlers hawking sentimental or devotional, military or bawdy ballads on street corners for a penny—causing Sir Philip Sidney to cry out, “Certainly I must confesse mine owne barbarousnesse, I never heard the old Song of *Percy* and *Duglas*, that I founde not my heart mooved more then with a Trumpet; and yet is it sung but by some blinde Crowder, with no rougher voyce then rude stile” (Sidney III: 24). Nowadays, Lanza estimates that 90 million people are listening to Muzak every day (5). Some product.

So what’s this product like? “As restaurants, elevators, malls, supermarkets, office complexes, airports, lobbies, hotels, and theme parks proliferate, the background, mood, or easy-listening music needed to fill these spaces becomes more and more a staple in our social diet” (Lanza 2). Yummy! Muzak is soft and sweet and sticky; lubricious and lubricating, a jelly, a lather that allows bodies to slip and slide across each other, across their environment. In doing so it prevents engagement, incorporation, or change—except in relation to itself. Does this proprietary sonic vaseline ease social intercourse, or facilitate cultural buggery? Lanza suggests we “need” such a jelly, as if the grating of hypercapitalist industrial society might otherwise manifest itself as a postmodern version of boilermaker’s ear—so Muzak is dribbled into ears until we’re deaf, it fills orifices until we’re stuffed.

Muzak is a sleight of hand, frictionless, a slipping perspective, the illusion of music. Muzak creates this illusion by reversing “figure” and “ground” (Lanza 3). It displaces attention from music’s manifest content to what Lanza calls the more “surreal” latent content; it encourages peripheral hearing; it reinforces the sense that we inhabit a dream; it is a relaxant.
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Does such an insidious and sickly noise have an archaeology? Doubtless: Lanza considers a history of Muzak, but has to deploy a stringent definition of “music” and thereby disallow “moods” from the classical repertoire: “Much of Europe’s early history is sprinkled with anecdotes in which music is used not for its attention-grabbing performance but as a disembodied voice to alter environments and invoke the Divine” (8). Yes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Aeolian Harp” moaning in the wind is a form of background music—but one in perfect harmony with the fluctuations of the breeze, emphasising the omnipresence of the divine (as exemplified in Robert Louis Stevenson’s short story “The Beach of Falesă”), but were the Sirens who sang to Odysseus really background music, as Lanza implies? Is Pythagoras’s inaural music of the spheres an antique and celestial mood music? Are Gregorian chants, “a kind of Medieval Muzak performed outside the monastery to uplift agricultural workers”? (9). Is any musical experience not appreciated predominantly for technical or performative merit therefore “Muzak”? Indeed, Lanza’s observation that “classical music” was originally background music (Telemann’s “Table Music” at dinner, Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” to cure insomnia) brings out the very contradiction of his definitions. It also implies that Muzak is something like the inevitable dreamwork of music, whereas it is more likely a capital perversion—or rather, as I will argue, it constitutes a particular construction of subjectivity that is under attack from nomadic philosophical marauders.

This subject, the passive consumer of Muzak, homo somnifer, is like a specter floating behind any human activity, any turbulence, any revolution, calling it back to bed with the voice of the sluggard. This indolence haunts space: it is almost ectoplasmic: “We can also trace mood music to the first church organ recitals that pacified worshippers between sermons. The cathedral became the architectural soundscape that would later inspire the builders of malls, atria, and auto showrooms” (Lanza 9). But the lilting tranquillity of the church is a peculiarly modern configuration of ecclesiastical space. As a refuge from the din of the city (and even the automotive country), it is a modern industrial phenomenon. Medieval and Renaissance churches focused sound: noise, loud, thunderous, crashing noise, was the preserve of the church in sermons, choirs, organs, bells—the peace of the city was breached only by the soft hubbub of the market, the rambunctious shouts of the carnival, and the cacophony of war. Noise to wake the dead.
And music itself is an instrument of war (as bagpipes, or Stuka sirens) and therefore deploys military technology to overcome limitations of distance, extent, and effect. Musical as well as Muzakil sound sources are covert emplacements: they have been gradually screened and hidden: the hydraulic organs and artificial singing birds of Baroque gardens, the constant trickling music of More’s Utopia or Huxley’s Brave New World, the rise of the gramophone, the wireless . . . inevitably Muzak. Lanza comments, “Mechanical sound reproduction engendered what an unapproving R. Murray Schafer in The Tuning of the World calls ‘schizophrenia,’ a state in which contemporary life is ‘ventriloquized’ by noises duplicated, transmitted, and divorced from their ‘natural’ sources” (Lanza 12).

Thus the world is fabricated by the presumption that there are such things as natural sources: this permits the simulation of a quiescent nature. And now the instantaneity and simultaneity of the schizo is incapable of distinguishing between phenomena, and sound may be managed as an aural form of control and surveillance. The ubiquity of Muzak is now the ubiquity of dislocation, of loss, of death. Muzak liquidates by remote control, and moreover as an aesthetic dimension of the state-of-the-art technologies of war. Like cinema, a clairvoyance which utterly superseded the visual world, Muzak is a clairaudience that anticipates the delivery of the millennial promise that industrial capitalism will satisfy all desires, fill each space snugly. Although history can only march at the rate of its slowest illusions, there is great camaraderie between the orders of simulacra: they scheme by association, they are aiders and abettors, they are the riders of the apocalypse. “The first theatrical silent films used barrel-organs, phonographs, and music boxes to mask the grating din emitted by early projectors” (Lanza 57). The revolution, one hopes, will not be Muzaked.

More war. Lanza attributes the invention of Muzak itself to General George Owen Squier, who developed the concept of piped noise in the course of his field work on the military applications of telephone and radio. Squier invented the high-speed telegraph, developed “tree telephones” (“florographs”) and underwater communication devices and was the first passenger to ride in Orville Wright’s biplane: a man flown to the edge of communication. He also investigated multiplexing and the broadcast of a music service through telephone lines. The success of his experiments led Squier to establish Wired Radio, Inc., to compete with the wireless, and he coined the name Muzak from music and Kodak.
Muzak, then, was initially the name of the system for sending music through telephone lines to many locations simultaneously; it soon became the product itself, whereupon it stalled (or bided its time, preparing to ambush the real)—unlike its semantic parent Kodak. By the end of the nineteenth century, "Kodak" was being used as a verb—to take a photograph, even to describe quickly and vividly; "Muzak," by comparison, has never had grammatical aspirations: it rejoices in the structural inertia of the noun.² Muzak carries connotations of totalitarianism and imposed order, of aural insistence. Unlike the hand-held camera that multiplies dramatic and illusory perspective to the point at which everyone becomes an actor, Muzak obliterates time and space in uniformity. It is the drone of stasis, of inertia, of stagnation. It is no accident that it seeps like paste through the anti-temporal dystopian visions of both Huxley and Orwell.

As a noun, however, it is a product and a thing. In 1924, one third of the budget spent on furniture in American homes was invested in radio equipment. By 1930, 40% of American households had radios; by 1938, 82%. Music was commodified as a sideboard—but a sideboard with particular qualities and characteristics: a sideboard that sang of virtual technologies. Sound production had to respond to the new medium, the medium of ether, for which broadcasters favored light orchestra music of violins, harps and chimes to smooth away the static of early radio. Lightness was all: light salon music, supper tunes, or slumber music—these were lullabies to opiate the masses, each a trompe l’oeil to smother the fizzing and buzzing at the limits of technology.

Light music redefined domestic space in the home into aural space emanating from the radio—proximity to the singing machine instilled order; it redefined the householder as a listener and communities as audiences, redefined household chores as protracted opportunities for product advertising under the guise of relaxation, and most importantly concretized the domestic timetable. It is reminiscent of the effect of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which through the ubiquity and uniformity of print, endeavored to impose religious orthodoxy on a turbulent nation. Time was regulated not around the natural rhythms of an individual, family, or community, but by the dictates of a technological medium (the printed book or the light music broadcast).

The commercial applications of this domestic regulation directed the Muzak Corporation, which controlled a profitable web of piped
music applications covering places of work and recreation (by 1939 at least 360 restaurants were serving to Muzak, it was ultimately used in 43 of the 50 biggest industrial companies in the United States). The Muzak Corporation did not broadcast previously recorded material, but custom-made “functional music,” and for up to 17 hours a day, restaurants and hotels played sounds spun on the central Muzak studio’s dual turntables.

In 1936, the Muzak Corporation began programming and sequencing styles into sets determined by the time of day and the type of business using the service. They developed four networks: purple, red, blue, and green. The purple network for restaurants echoed the tempo of eating patterns; red supplied news, weather, sport, and gave time checks to bars and grills; blue encouraged shoppers in department stores; and the green network for private residences provided a diurnal rhythm to the day.

The claims made by the Muzak Corporation were astounding: “functional music” reduced absenteeism in the workplace by 88%, with a bonus 53% reduction in early departures. It also reduced the likelihood of accidents. Muzak was a universally benign influence: it improved milk yield, even calmed cattle being led to slaughter. This is highly significant: the remote effects, the sympathetic magic of Muzak. The practices of western industrialism have always sought to naturalize their technologies and harmonize their productive capacities with the living body. Quotas of milk yield, prime slaughter—these are not natural processes for they reveal intensive, selective, livestock breeding for economic gain, but Muzak anaesthetizes, etherizes them. As I write this, Jimmy Cauty, formerly of the KLF and K Foundation, has been receiving complaints from his neighboring farmers in Devon for creating outlandish sounds that have supposedly had such sorcerous effects as causing stillborn calves and monstrous births—startlingly similar to the malign effects of the howl of the banshee. Noise to wake the dead.

Muzak was promoted as anything but witchcraft, but of course Muzak is the enchanter, the beguiler, indeed the siren, separating the body from emotions, not directly (as by ingested drugs), but indirectly, by subtle insinuation and habituation. Muzak provided “Music for Mortuaries”; Eisenhower had it installed in the White House, Lyndon Johnson had it installed in his ranch. Experiments were conducted to see how Muzak affected military alertness; it was fitted to Polaris submarines; Armstrong and Aldrin tuned in on Apollo (“Gramophones of the Gods?”) (Moorcock 236). As Lanza says, “Muzak has always been at the
forefront in producing music that directly addresses our role in modern life. Its efforts to use tempo and timbre to reflect parts of day and to adjust them to the human ‘fatigue cycle’ reveal how walls, corridors, lighting, and the contours of man-made enclosures alter our perceptions and bio-rhythms” (150). It programs the environment.

By the end of the sixties, total yearly earnings of the Muzak Corporation exceeded $400 million—a capital success, but everywhere it seems associated with containment, imprisonment, and control, a denial of human emotions—what Lanza christens “melodic surveillance”—a melody to maintain social order, an instrument of cretinization, music while you work as hard as you can (Lanza 228). It disguises stress, controls and directs human activity to generate the maximum productivity and the minimum discontent. It replaces managerial responsibility with Muzak statistics, calms the workers as they are led to the abattoir.

Muzak makes the total control of the environment a possibility, a necessity. The stereo or the radio may be turned off (sabotage is as simple as pulling a plug)—but you can’t silence Muzak at work, in the elevator, or at airports or hospitals or mortuaries. The homogeneity of, for example, elevator music is quite deliberate: it gives the illusion of continuity to a building to overcome (displace) vertigo, piping angelically and even ethereally up the 102 stories of the Empire State Building (Lanza 38). Our acculturation to Muzak should make it unutterably sinister: the sweet Muzak that lulls us into a completely false sense of security as we recline in a dentist’s chair is actually full of grisly foreboding. But in the world created by Muzak, listening is passive. Once one activates, the hellish mechanisms of Muzak are laid bare: it is the harmony of holocaust. As Harry Harris says somewhere, “The songs of capitalism must one day be drowned in the roar of its enemies, those who desire to live not merely to consume. In order to make the world dance one must first turn off the music.”

Lanza’s speculations on the implications of Muzak are quite fascinating; my own spiral from his. Henceforth, we diverge. Lanza falls prey to an excess of indolent detail in recounting and cataloguing postwar mood music: “Mood music is perhaps the twentieth century’s most authentic music, tailored exclusively for the electronic revolution. These recordings fully exploit the intended use of the hi-fi and stereo as domestic appliances with all of the environmental controls of thermostats, air-conditioners, and security systems” (Lanza 70). What does Lanza mean
by “authentic”? Electronically crafted background music on tap certainly is peculiar to the twentieth century—as are all electrical musical instruments, mixing and dubbing effects, serial composition, and the mechanical reproduction of a massive variety of musical styles. No more need for automata to be wound up to play the piano—these robots have evolved into highly efficient synthesizers, faking noise.

Lanza showcases the categories of mood music’s golden era. It is amazingly comprehensive—nerdish even—so much so that Elevator Music saps your energy with its litany of awful titles. It is enervating. There are seemingly endless, and endlessly grotesque, examples of the miserable imaginative poverty of corporative popular culture—deliciously excruciating in the flesh, but vilely pornographic in the pages of a 1990s study. Jackie Gleason’s twee mood music (amazingly, he worked with Dali), Nelson Riddle’s burbling seascapes, Mantovani’s queasy echoed strings (Mantovani was the first musician to sell a million stereo records in the United States, music tailored for the armchair, as the New York Times noted of a 1966 Carnegie Hall performance: “As the sumptuous sounds filled the auditorium, you could almost close your eyes and imagine yourself back home listening to the hi-fi” [qtd. in Lanza 85]). Liberace’s ghastly kitsch piano, asinine supermarket sounds by Ray Conniff (whose music “connotes the mystically metallic clanking of shopping carts trailing down aisles, the rustle of cash registers, the tinkle of loose change, and the grunt of chromium doors automatically opening for the next phalanx of shoppers” [Lanza 108]), Bert Kaempfert’s hideously jaunty nonsense.

Mood music was, admittedly, more risqué than Muzak: an insidious reptilian ally for the lounge lizard who leered and leched over his tooled backgammon board to the breathy simulated (indeed) orgasm of Jane Birkin’s “Je T’Aime ... Moi Non Plus.” This was not like rock and roll—“a contemporary incitement to mindless fucking and arbitrary vandalism”—but ensured the reproduction of the bourgeois species by providing echoing, moody continuums of sound to veil seduction and to disguise the snaky sounds of slithering (Melly 34). The Mystic Moods Orchestra even packaged one album with a free scented handkerchief for mopping up afterwards. If Muzak be the food of lurve, drone on; give me my noise to wake the dead.

In this context, Muzak embodies the bourgeois fear of silence, mimicking the nervous chatter at dinner parties. One yearns for a “Gaping
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Yawn of Silence” (the magnificent culmination of Rudimentary Peni’s Cacophony: the sound of the needle in an empty groove). Take away the Muzak machines and you will begin, with profound intimations of mortality, to hear your body decay, and die. Muzak, from the delivery room to the mortuary, assumes immortality, but as suspended animation: dead but still dreaming. Lanza concludes, “Elevator music (besides just being good music) is essentially a distillation of the happiness that modern technology has promised” (233). It is an echo from the future heaven on earth, the realization of a capitalist utopia, a piped dream.

Rhizomusic

“Got to get a shift on.”
—Performance

Where to start? From where you are . . .

TURNER: Not in the mood?
CHAS: Why don’t you play us a tune, pal?
TURNER: I don’t like music.
—Performance

Goethe once described architecture as frozen music—or rather he discovered a piece of paper on which he had written that architecture was frozen music. Marshall McLuhan noted the fundamental affinity of space and sound, comparing architecture with music as the envelopment and delineation of space. Muzak programs the environment. In other words, Muzak is a dimension of the city, a manifestation of urban space, aural architecture, a component of a total environment. If you want an image of the future, imagine the 101 Strings cascading against a human face . . . forever.

Muzak has created an architecture for us, it has engineered cities of sound. Silence is unthinkable—the absence of Muzak, but because Muzak has no end, no critical perspective is possible. Another route must be found. The backstreets of great cities may be clues to the labyrinth, secret paths, interlacing riddles—as Thomas De Quincey knew in Confessions of an English Opium Eater, as H. P. Lovecraft knew in “The Music of Erich Zann,” as Guy Debord knew in The Soci-
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ety of the Spectacle. Music in De Quincey is always only half heard or half remembered, as in a dream; the untraceable Zann spins an Orphic gate to another world; psychogeography unravels the city in symphonic revolutionary majesty: “sous les paves, la plage.” To paraphrase Le Corbusier on architecture: music may, by transforming the world, render revolution unnecessary.

But Muzak is pervasive, pernicious, ubiquitous, intangible, impalpable, implacable. How to deal with such an enemy? It merges with, contaminates, music, sounds. Muzak is more than a parasite. It smothers noise, reanimates it in a disgusting semblance of life. It is necrophiliac. So we find ourselves in a military situation. This is nothing short of total war, and Muzak—insofar as it destroys the environment—is a weapon of total war.

To counter: a mad piping at the feet of a blind god. We cannot sing the songs of change, as we sing with the organs of repression. Yet there is a revolutionary music, as famously noted by Lester Bangs in his essay “A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise”: “You probably can’t stand it, but this stuff has its adherents (like me) and esthetic (if you want to call it that)”; quoting Schafer (again) on “Sacred Noise” (Bangs 301). He describes the most painful, extreme sounds he has heard (primarily wild territorializations of guitar and voice)—a form of delirious masochistic torture to revivify the body from the outside in. Enter Lou Reed’s Metal Machine Music (of course)—that electronic cacophony Bangs elsewhere calls “Ugandan Muzak” (107).

Metal Machine Music is essential, if unlistenable—all the spaces from between all the notes of the Velvet Underground, spiked with Reed’s buzzy amphetamine logic. But it does suggest an aesthetic—although Bangs is wrong to pursue the clatter of guitars so closely. Like Muzak, Metal Machine Music has no beginning and no end, dividing itself across four LP sides with brutal tape splices and winding up in a locked groove. It is just noise: just (“Right, am I right?”), just (“I call that equitable”), just (“It is alleged, by the prosecution . . .”), just (“Right, again”), just (“Just a—just an accident”), just noise. Noise to wake the dead.

It heralds the experimental trance and trace noise that appears on In Memoriam: Gilles Deleuze, and Folds and Rhizomes for Gilles Deleuze—two recent albums commemorating Deleuze. The CDs include Zoviet*France’s gently folded echoes of pure becoming, Atom Heart’s
polished excrescences of sound becoming animal, Blue Byte's tour de force of scratching and exhilarating lines of flight, improvising the collapse of music, dramatizing perpetual breakdown. Jim O'Rourke's "As In" is barely audible, eventually rising to the translucent glow of silence, Oval's "You Are Here 0.9B" deterritorializes sound (bird song, pop song) through intricate seizures, Bleed give in Patent the noise of 99 cascading stings.

This is metal machine music, no longer music—but neither the primordial noise of Metal Machine Music. The Deleuze tracks are not just noise without beginning or end. Together, they constitutes the aesthetic of noise, of anti-linearity, without beginning or end, in medias res, deterritorialized, incorporating, merging ("I say merger, gentlemen, not takeover—words still have meanings even in our days of the computer" [Performance]), revolutionizing: rhizomusic. It's music, Jim, but not as we know it.

For a moment, a personal history of noise: from the eerie swarm of Ligeti on the soundtrack to Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey and the spatial experiments of Luciano Berio and Iannis Xenakis, to the druggy whir of Spacemen 3's "Transparent Radiation" and the dreamed Selected Ambient Works Volume Two of the Aphex Twin. Then the Future Sound of London's collapsing "Bird Wings" or "Domain" (with Pachelbel's Canon in D Major pacing across the background); the unexpected fall of the Goths into ambience: Ministry's "Grace," the tranquil plateau of the Nefilim's "24th Moment," before In Memoriam and Folds and Rhizomes.

Noise and Deleuze and Guattari: noise to wake the dead? They began A Thousand Plateaus with liner notes (they even recommend that the book be read as one would listen to a record): "Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand 11-12, ix). Noise to wake the dead, to reclaim dreams, to awake from within. Rhizomusic may, by transforming dreams, render revolution unnecessary.

Rhizomusic's grating electric pulses and scintillating washes of static are composed of technological limitations and along electronic margins—precisely what Muzak and mood have tried to disguise: noise comprised of forces, flows of desire and becoming (and this is clearly
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The dynamic of *Performance*, too). These are the spaces from between, from behind, from beneath the sounds of Muzak—what it dare not tell of itself: filthy electricity. The immediate material and political dimensions of the sign (and Muzak is clearly semiotic) become the instruments of their deconstruction, their martyrdom (Bogue 83-85). Signs will burn; Muzak will crackle, suffocate, and incinerate on the electric chair. Sing it to death: “Music has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand 299*).

How? Whither subjectivity? In Deleuzian terms, listening to music is an organ machine plugging into an energy machine: “Desire causes the current to flow” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 5). This connection—of machines—reaches a point of intensity when the machines break down. And these intensities are captured on *In Memoriam* and *Folds and Rhizomes*: flows that crystallize with crackings and squeakings, before, like rhizomes, they proliferate in new tangled directions, to other plateaus. Listen to the antithesis of Muzak: fighting total war with pure noise.

Muzak, then, is revealed as a molar flow, a series of collective and regulated formations. It offers a challenge, but a covert and duplicitous challenge, having colonized almost every musical genre (anyone for *Grunge Lite*?). *But rhizomusic is molecular, a quantum/wave form: it blurs, produces a multiplicity of aberrant flows—it cannot be listened to, it envelops like a lover, like the strange woman of the Book of Proverbs whose mouth is smoother than oil, whose feet go down to death, whose steps take hold on hell: it demands delicious transgression (5.3-5). It is transient, “The Last Train to Transcentral,” trance. It predicates no subject; it can only be heard by a body without organs. It cannot be listened to; it is heard only when it is no longer (or not yet) playing. It recognizes and refutes the challenge of Muzak by self/trans-evisceration. We are no longer organic subjects manacled by machines, but machines ourselves. “The future is metal!” (*Tetsuo*).

The starts and stops, ebbs and flows of these machines are apparent only in middles—“it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand 25*). Musically, this is the space between the notes, drawn out and folded back upon itself. Muzak is not impermeable, nor drip-dry—it can be folded and creased and cracked to create a monstrous offspring (Massumi 2, 145). Muzak,
cannot flow, cannot intensify, cannot become itself because it denies its very nature: static.

Where can it hide? Muzak is traveling so fast it never moves. It no longer travels at the speed of sound; it travels at the speed of light down fiber-optic lines. . . . It travels faster still: instantaneously, juxtaposing all matter and locality. It eliminates chance by repetition and multiplication. It synthesizes reality. It replaces the real. It goes nowhere because it is everywhere (even unto space). It shadows history, our history is sound-tracked with Muzak—herein Muzak finds a host.

So how fast does our history travel? Where is it going? Anywhere but where it’s at. Stop the bus, please, I live here. One is reminded of Benjamin—revolution is not a runaway train but an attempt to apply the handbrake. Thus Muzak, which disguises the acceleration of history and the substitution of power for speed, needs to be stopped, needs to be broken down by the dislimning, deliquescent, evanescent collapse of rhi- zomusic:

'Tis nearly passed, for I begin to hear
Strange but sweet sounds, and the loud rocky dashing
Of waves, where time into Eternity
Falls over ruined worlds. The wind is fair,
The boat is in the bay,
And the fair mermaid pilot calls away.

(Thomas Beddoes, Death's Jest-Book)

Write new histories, antihistories, noisy histories. Before history was a chant or a poem, it was a trance (Virilio, Speed 158n; Virilio, Popular 38n). History can be written from the middle: antikinetic history offers to restore the fabular, the local, the personal (nomadology). But it is treacherous ground. “Pure history, then, is only the translation of a pure strategic advance over terrain. Its power is to precede and be final, and the historian is but a captain in the war of time”—and they march not to the beat of a drunken drummer, but to the steady reel of Muzak (Virilio, Speed 117-18). History, like Muzak, is prosthetic, monstrously prosthetic. Fix that prosthesis. Turn up the volume of history, turn it up, and up, until it distorts like the “Harry Flowers” Muzak theme in Performance, until it wakes the dead, until it breaks down. It will. “It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do
not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet” (Kafka 102).

Turn on, tune in, break down . . .

CHAS: Oh—there you are. Sorry to disturb. Has anyone got a sixpence for the 'phone? Er, can I er, use the blower up here?

TURNER: We haven’t got a blower up here.

PHERBER: H! What in God's name has he done to his hair?

TURNER: He's blown it.

CHAS: Yeah, well that’s it, dear. I got to ring up my agent again.

PHERBER: Dye!

TURNER: I quite fancied the red.

CHAS: No, no it was red was dyed.

TURNER: Dead.

CHAS: Dyed. Red.

PHERBER: Dyed it. Dead.

CHAS: Red. Red.

TURNER: Van Gogh, eh?

CHAS: Oh no, this is the normal.

TURNER: The normal?

CHAS: Yeah, I was just having a laugh, having a laugh you see with my act, with my image. Do you know what I mean.

TURNER: Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.

CHAS: Thought you would. He reckons, my agent, that er, time for a change.

TURNER: Time for a change.

(Performance)

Notes

1. Lanza uses the term “Muzak” loosely, either to refer to the particular product of the Muzak Corporation, or background music in general; I use it just as loosely.

2. I had rather hoped that “Muzak” wouldn’t be in the OED, which might have somehow confirmed that it doesn’t exist, except as a an illusion, the simulation of noise.
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3. The word “just” appears 31 times in Performance, 11 times used by Chas—but predominantly in the first half of the film. He barely uses the word at all once he begins to trip, whereupon it is seized by Turner and Pherber as if it functions as a key to his existence: “British justice.”

4. I refute Lanza’s implication that trance, chill-out music, and the current electronic avant-garde of the Orb and the Aphex Twin are Muzaked.

5. The visceral effects of ambient trance rhizomusic—tingling and jangling and sublime reverie—are precisely those associated with the genre of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, which may explain this unexpected loop to bands like the Nefilim. Scanner’s “Without End” (In Memoriam), strung along portentous utterance, overlaps considerably with ambient Goth.

Works Cited


The Condition of Muzak


Discography


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