

COLLISION

Imagined Drone Ecologies:
Listening to Vibracathedral
Orchestra

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ABSTRACT

In this short piece, I describe a performance by Vibracathedral Orchestra in which the musicians collectively create an atmosphere of gradually coalescing and dissolving plateaus of droning sound. That this collective sound-making (and listening) can offer an aesthetic conducive to contemplating environment and aesthetics I demonstrate as well as describe in reporting my responses to the performance, drifting from description into a more imaginative realm of speculation on urban space, plants, concrete, time, memory, and the productive flowering ruin of cities and bodies. Returning with the end of the performance to more conventional description, the short review performatively enacts the potential for drone music to evoke, challenge, and explore an imaginative aesthetics of environmental sound.

KEYWORDS

Drone
Utopia
Nature
Imagination
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It's good to get inside out of the London dark and rain, get a drink and a seat in the venue's gradually filling small space with the price of tickets on the chalkboard outside recently rubbed away, written over with the words "SOLD OUT." After a brief period warming up around the tiny candle on the table, support act Blood Stereo appears behind a table piled with electronic equipment and cables and begins to set in motion their shifting sonic collage of found curiosities, recordings from radio, and slowed down or treated samples with added hisses, drones, and scratches as the performers Karen Constance and Dylan Nyoukis deem appropriate. Different platforms of sound are built from these collected straws and bits of colored string, then disassembled and reconfigured around other planks: what sounds like an Italian or Spanish instrumental classic-rock-out, perhaps looped or edited, under a fuzz of static; some repetitive speech, instructions of some sort, slowed down to a maddening, drawling solipsism; some folky string pluckings, which appear hesitantly in the distance before wandering off elsewhere, lost and uncertain. Movements take shape and then gradually disperse as cassette tapes run down, play out, or are replaced at a musician's whim.

This kind of sound is here presented as music but is made up of elements that may otherwise and elsewhere be considered (or ignored) as noise. This gesture of recontextualization of ready-mades or found objects in art is of course a familiar one, already a hundred years old, but for me the particular qualities of repositioned sound as textured temporal space afford greater possibilities than objects in a gallery for prompting modes of

thought which incorporate drifting daydreams as well as critical reflection. The deployment of noises and sounds, recognizable or indistinguishably combined, and the indeterminate and changing orientation of the listener are a starting point for sparking speculative thought. As Michel Serres and Jacques Attali have observed, noise occupies multiple positions and relations: it can be understood as signal and interruption of signal, message as well as channel, elusively and interchangeably both host and parasite.¹ Similarly, the particularity of sound as a medium which allows apprehension of shifting patterns extending in time can make possible imaginary explorations of environments in unpredictable reverie while simultaneously structuring an actual environment of vibrations in space.

Now, after a break, the six musicians of tonight's incarnation of the Vibracathedral Orchestra circulate around and then gather in the space at the front from which the table has been cleared. It's almost like a playpen between a triangle of three chairs, a collection of assorted bits and pieces, horns, microphones, guitars, unusual instruments, and other curiosities. "We're gonna play for a while. Feel free to get up, go outside for a smoke, go to the bar. We don't want no reverence." Each multi-instrumentalist casts around for one or other of the oboes, horns, hooters, tooters, bashers, squeakers, and squawkers and begins merrily trumpeting their dissonant honks and pattering circles. Each noise seems to be completely indifferent to the others while simultaneously contributing to a communal chaos as each note loses its distinction in the general loudness. The din continues for some time ... is it always going to be like this? How many minutes has it already been? Have we always been here?

Over the nearly twenty years of their hovering existence, the Vibracathedral Orchestra have primarily included Neil Campbell, Mick Flower, Bridget Hayden, Julien Bradley, and Adam Davenport, featuring additional or fewer sound-makers as situations dictate for the coming together of their buzzing, whirling, glittering drones. The sounds are constructed by each player peeping or bowing or tapping along in little elliptical patterns on whatever noise-making tool is at hand, each musician contributing individually insignificant scraps or phrases or bits of junk, which (with the right spark of arbitrary magic) come together to form a collective bird's-nest UFO of transcendental shimmering reverie. I'm not sure how I first heard of them, but their humming organic electricity alongside other underground entities like Hototogisu and sometimes Ashtray

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Navigations caught my ears as invoking a kind of sound I call “levitation drone.”

Gradually, the individual lines of each player become distinguishable with wavering notes and recognizable timbres separating themselves from the mixture. At the back of the instrument-strewn performance area, a horn is placed on the floor and a round drum taken up in its place. A measured thumping emerges, and the different threads begin to wind themselves around that rhythm. Sounds coalesce to form a compelling groove, relying on no melody nor led by any particular instrument but propelled by some mysterious collective sentience in sound. For the next hour and a bit, an endless variety of overlapping and intertwining sounds constructs layers and plateaus, pieced together intuitively and spontaneously from organic sound components, before dismantling themselves just as casually. A sound will fall away as a musician drops out, following a momentary instinct to replace their instrument with another that lies close at hand; without seeming to react directly to each action or change, the assemblage of noises slowly, impassively reorients and recombines. A new raft of woven sound is reconfigured out of similar branches and twigs, setting off on a different course directed by the winds of collaborative chance rather than intention. I close my eyes, for a while just listening to the detailed mixture of sounds with no broad melody or sweeping narrative to follow. Unsteadily at first but then with more confident balance, leaving behind the scaffolding of individual action, the spinning wheel of sound lifts off the ground.

Slowly, the scattered surfaces of insistent, intricate noises in implacably revolving plateaus give way to strange, imaginary vistas ... the abandoned roof of a crumbling tower block overrun with climbing creepers affords a view over a forgotten city, submerged in jungly tendrils ... in a becalmed haze, turn to descend the tower beneath the surface of the green ... at first down worn corroded concrete stairs that become ever more thickly choked with vegetation ... until the easiest path is to step out through the twentieth-floor windows, long since absent of glass, supported by branches, stalks, thick leaves, a slow tumble through ever denser foliage until a headfirst, steady scramble downwards, suspended by forgiving green layers. At last, reaching the ground, the base of the tower is the foot of a vast tree ... sit, breathe for a moment, surrounded by tiny birds ... a seed, then roots, and a tree trunk grows inside my chest, squeezing then becoming my lungs, until the carapace of the body's shell splits, unfurls, and falls away ... the head

topples off, rolls, settles, and bursts into purple and red, orange and pink flowers. The tree gets stronger, thicker, grows, curled leaf, bark of the old body rips and tears, stomped into atoms of dirt, ferried away by insects and renewed ... green shoots, moss on the side of the tree. High rise ruin, forest gravity ... tree growing skin discarded, electric storm ... a slow explosion of rain-pelted flowers ... riot, wither, lush return ... rust unclasps its fingers... concrete submits, relaxes grip, dissolves ... laughs, crumbles, sings, hums ... shreds ... breaks ... offers up, lays down ... sighs, breathes ... opens its hands, its leaves ...

What is it about this series of composite drones that can occasion this oscillation in imagined bodily identification between concrete and tree, urban ruin and organic renewal, animal and plant, altitude and grounding? Is this weird flowering of meditative consciousness out of musical engagement anything other than a mere novelty in unfolding interior oddness, a transitory escapism, or can it afford lasting effects in orientation towards environments and ecologies beyond the realms of the imagination and the concert venue? Theorists of altered consciousness and mysticism from William James to Henri Bergson to Aldous Huxley have asserted that such states or “experiences” will remain private, isolated, and inaccessible unless integrated into transformations in ethical comportment and social life.² Yet, as observed by others such as Stephen Katz and Michel de Certeau, it is not “experiences” that exist in social space but texts, communications, manipulations of words and sounds such as this present description of engagement with music.³ Perhaps a hint towards potential real effects of reported reverie can be found in the apparent democratic-organic formations of the group’s collective action, where the unpredictable and undirected movements or inclinations of each sound-maker nevertheless contribute to a holistic something with its own open-ended logic of being. This practice does the work of planting seeds of participation, which include attentive listening, welcoming and inviting fellow world-dwellers into the communal space of shared sound. The collaborative sound at first just is — and then is moving in unknown directions — even towards a transformative conception of what it might be like to inhabit a living, imagining body held in and freed by and joined with others in strange vibrational space yet untied from the specifics of being a *human* body in sound. Weird drone music as a radically other arena of experience, a fragile and tentative potential world, transitorily inhabited and explored.

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The final squall dissipates, and the rounded gentle collapse of the collective noise brings applause, cheers, and a blinking awakening from those who might have travelled farther off. Even several of the musicians look up as if assuming that the sound has drawn to a natural close. But a delicate, unusual guitar line uncurls out of the dissolving debris, lovely peculiar notes unfamiliar to language. Unconcerned or even unaware of the expectations of the performance having finished, the winding ribbon continues to find its way, fragile but resilient, refusing a deferential fading-out or a resolution into acquiescent melody. Other tones, peeps, and drones retune their antennae, reconfigure around this lilting, becalmed, but inquisitive coda. With relaxed smiles and breaths, this family of noises provides a brief quiet period of reflection, reintegration, a slow walk up a warm beach, an inhale-exhale of slow intention, a foundational grounding after strange journeys to weird and remote utopias.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, 1902); Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911); Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1945); Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956).
- 3 Stephen T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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