

**MUSIC FROM LISTEN/SPACE**



Photo by Matt Brown

House concert, Tollgate Canyon, 2015

**MUSIC FROM LISTEN/SPACE  
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**VOLUME 1**

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# SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

**eldritch Priest**

**I**sn't it true? Experimental music is nothing. In a way, it's like a thought. You have it, and unless something comes of it—unless it's given expression in some material way—it's as though it never was. Strange, then, how at the core of a more or less closely related family of expressive activities, aesthetic sensibilities, and ways of using sounds to mean something by the term “experimental music” is a conviction that it's possible to organize and live one's life around something that, like a thought, may as well be nothing. From this perspective, experimental music looks, well, cultish. But a cult of what? Cults venerate something, and as I just noted, experimental music is, maybe, nothing. Or at least its composers are devoted to making something of nothing. So maybe experimental music is less of a cult and something more like non-Euclidean geometry, which is not *not* Euclidean geometry but a geometry that declines certain of the latter's definitional axioms in order to make something from what would otherwise be nothing—the meeting of parallel lines, for instance. In that case, maybe we could think of experimental music as a kind of music that declines certain definitions of the latter. But if that is so, then what exactly does it decline?



I know Listen/Space and its founders from a visit to NYC in spring 2008 when Katie, Devin and a number of the composers and performers featured in this volume played a piece of mine at, of all places, an academic conference on art and philosophy in midtown Manhattan. This work was typical experimental fare: a single melody and no fixed instrumentation. The melody, which never repeats, is about two hours long. The ensemble, the “band” really, was assembled by Eric km Clark. He was living in Park Slope at the time and somehow was able to convince these fantastic musicians to play a melody for two hours while graduate students and university professors sipped wine, ate cheese, and nattered on about—of course—art and philosophy during the closing reception of the conference. Yes, we were background music, and we weren't paid, we were barely thanked—the performance outlasted the reception—and finally, we were kicked out of the building by security. Like a thought, the event came and went as though it never was.

But what's the point of this vignette besides insinuating myself into the prehistory of Listen/Space, which, in a nondescript building in Williamsburg, began about a week after this performance? As far as I can tell, it's a concrete example of how something comes of nothing and how what's called experimental music subsists, like a thought, in its passing. Now of course, this could be said of any musical event since all music belongs to the occasion of its own passing. Yet there's something about the way the works collected in this volume make the *intensification* of their ideas their primary content in a way that the person absentmindedly whistling to herself doesn't,

or the most self-referencing Brahms symphony won't. Now, given the amount of ink spilled on how music of the latter sort was composed with the aim to be nothing but the unfolding of its idea, you'd think it would do exactly what I've said these experimental works do. To a degree it does, but so-called "absolute music" has always been so preoccupied with integrating the variations that intensify its idea that it distracts itself from its own purpose. Whistling to oneself comes a little closer to enjoying the intensification of its idea. However, the whistler's absentmindedness tends to reference the relation of the phases of a tune's to-ing and fro-ing to the phases of a body's movements in a way that prevents the former from cohering as its own event. As such, the idea intensified by whistling to oneself gets alloyed with the rhythms of a body's doings. But a work like G. Douglas Barrett's *Everything is purged from this composition but Melody, no ideas have entered this work (x100)* or Jonathan Marmor's *Short Stories* make their ideas, the thought of themselves, everything.

What you get with these two pieces is a form of play in which the variation of a single musical idea extracts an expressive value from the excessiveness of its own act. In other words, the "-esqueness" of each variation, the way in which each iteration is executed in the style of itself, is the aesthetic yield of the work. The creation of a style, radically local and singularly exemplified by this and only this work, in just this particular way, is to make something of nothing and to find value in doing just that.

As foolish as this sounds, the perceived value of creating a style, of "-esquing" or inventing a manner of doing for the sake of its own expression, is not exclusive to this rare breed of experimental composers. The philos-

opher Brian Massumi writes about the value of style in the context of animal play-fighting, arguing that the latter's finessed exemplification as "not combat" is expressive of an excess that's inherent to all vital activity. This excess, he says, "is one with the -esqueness of the vital gestures of play" and its value lies in its being "an act lived purely for its own sake."<sup>1</sup> So, in addition to its semiotic value, which makes it possible to distinguish a nip from a bite, an animal's play-style has an aesthetic quality to the precise degree that the variations of "not combat" expressive of it summon, but at the same time suspend, the territorial functions of those combative acts that it is not. Said a little differently, teeth and muscle meet in an "unnatural" way that transforms their ordinary manner of coming together. "The ludic gesture," Massumi writes, "is performed with a mischievous air, with an impish exaggeration or misdirection, or on the more nuanced end of the spectrum, a flourish, or even a certain under-stated grace modestly calling attention to the spirit in which the gesture is proffered."<sup>2</sup>

The animal who nips can be said in its artifice, its stylized way of mingling fang with flesh, to draw something more, something *expressively* valuable, from nothing but a bite.

In a sense, then, the music in this volume nips at its own goings-on. And it's experimental not because its harmonies are novel, its melodies unheard of, or its rhythms inconceivably complex. It's experimental because it's *played*. It's played like so much other music is—they strike, scrape, pluck, tap, blow into instruments for a while and then, after a time, they stop. But

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1 Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

2 Massumi, 9.

it's also *played* in the way a game's rules are by its most skilled participants. Master gamers push ("play") the rules to their most remote possibilities, not necessarily to win, but for the sheer value in varying the game's expression. You can hear this emphatically in Travis Just's *Keep Your Eyes Open* and Devin Maxwell's *Ogden*. Quentin Tolmieri's *Septet*, too. In these works, the striking, scraping, plucking, blowing gestures are stylized to such an extent that they approach the condition of parody and express a music at its most comedic. But you can also hear this more subtly in Laura Steenberge's *Ritual for Three* and André Cormier's *Dengel Sele Esbe* whose gestures underplay their ludic manner in a way that turns their expression strangely deadpan.<sup>3</sup> At either end of this spectrum, this music is experimental because, to play on Gregory Bateson's formula,<sup>4</sup> the music in this collection does not sound like the music for which it stands *would* sound. In other words, the music-esqueness of these melodies, harmonies, and rhythms make the music that would otherwise be sounded heard as a possibility. And being heard *as a possibility* is a very different thing than being heard as a matter of fact. "If it were music I were hearing, then I would be listening to melodies, harmonies, and rhythms" has a different ring to it than, "I am listening to music because and I am hearing melodies, harmonies, and rhythms." It's a modest ring yet distinctive nevertheless, for it's expressive precisely in declining to sound how it *would* sound as a musical matter of fact.

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3 Just to clarify, something that's "deadpan" is still expressive, just weirdly so because it's an expression of expressionlessness.

4 "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote." See Gregory Bateson, "Theory of Play and Fantasy" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 138-148.



It's challenging enough to think about what it means to say that something is what it is by being not what it would be, but listening to something as what it *would* sound like is perhaps impossible. How do you hear the sound of possibility that experimental music makes audible directly? Like Narcissus, who only recognizes images that bear a resemblance to himself, what often passes for music is what already sounds like it. In other words, any expression of how experimental practices *would* sound can only be heard as yet another way in which music already *does* sound. Perhaps this is why the possible of experimental music ends up just being heard as yet another fact of music. Even where the signs of the latter are wholly lacking, they still function as a mirror in which music can gaze and venerate what declines to be it as yet another striking image of itself. It's always a mug's game because music is always already just what it sounds like. In a sense, then, this means that there can be no experimental music. But then again, if music is just what it sounds like and sounding *like* music is just what an experimental practice yields, then in another sense there is *nothing but* experimental music. I'm not certain that this is right, but what I'm playing at (and for) isn't certainty. And why should it be? Who plays to get things right? And who decides what's right anyways? Play isn't about being "sure" or being "correct." It's about expressing the excesses of such things and drawing out a little something extra from our behaviours and encounters in which things like "truth" or "certainty" or even "music" make sense. Ironically, and despite everything I've written here, maybe this is not nothing.