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"Listening Out" to Experimental Music in Canada: Publics, Subjects, Places

Jeremy Strachan

Résumé de l'article

En 2016, Michael Snow et Mani Mazinani ont improvisé sur d'anciens modèles de synthétiseurs analogues sur le Yonge-Dundas Square, remplissant un des espaces publics et commerciaux les plus occupés de Toronto avec un filigrane sonore rétro-futuriste. Près de cinquante ans plus tôt, l'oeuvre *Katimavik* d'Otto Joachim — une installation sonore électronique à quatre pistes — animait, avec des sons étrangement semblables, le pavillon du Canada à l'Expo 67 de Montréal. Dans les deux cas, les auditeurs étaient invités à déambuler au sein d'une architecture sonore et spatiale caractérisée par ses dimensions publiques et plurielles. Durant les décennies ayant séparé ces deux événements, les centres d'artistes auto-gérés à but non lucratif ont proliféré à travers le Canada, accueillant ainsi les expérimentateurs locaux cherchant à poursuivre leur démarche créative, au nom du développement culturel régional et national. La longue histoire canadienne des pratiques en musique expérimentale, aussi bien aux marges que dans ses centres d'écoute, abonde en tentatives d'insérer cette musique dans la vie quotidienne. Nous avançons que la diffusion de la musique expérimentale au Canada dans des espaces toujours plus en lien avec le quotidien nous permet de comprendre comment l'espace peut est généré à travers l'intersubjectivité de l'écoute — un acte impliqué dans une variété de processus actifs. Lors de l'écoute de musique expérimentale, bien différente d'autres contextes d'écoutes, l'auditeur est saisi par un réseau de relations dans lequel les lieux de composition, de performance et de réception deviennent ponctuels et instables. Nous proposons donc que l'écoute de musique expérimentale au Canada peut être pensé comme une « écoute vers l'extérieur », ou comme une « disposition d'attention, d'anticipation et de communication ». Certains exemples y sont considérés comme des études de cas, afin de redéfinir l'interaction entre la musique créative et le public canadien, ou autrement dit, ce que peut représenter la présence de la musique expérimentale « dans le monde ».

"LISTENING OUT" TO EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC IN CANADA: PUBLICS, SUBJECTS, PLACES

Jeremy Strachan

I would like to start this brief article by giving away the ending. I mean not only to pre-emptively occlude the argument I will make about experimental music's strange efficacy in rendering real and meaningful the places for listening subjects who inhabit them, but I mean to signpost right away the persistent problem of musical objecthood attendant to listening to experimental music. That is to ask, Towards what kinds of sonic materials are we meant to be directing our attention, and to what extent are we invested in understanding the form and structure of those materials? This problem is rendered with even greater urgency when the circumstances of audition enhance experimental music's historically antagonistic relationship with the traditional model of the concert hall environment—when those circumstances seemingly enable a listening that is plural, contingent, distracted, and public.

Two examples of such a public listening to experimental music in Canada will bookend my argument about the ways in which a commons, or public spaces of plural audition, have constituted a particular listening environment for experimental music; and particular to the case of experimental music—where authorship, musical form, and sonic materials can be perceived to be distributive and instable—how listening might serve as a mode of subjectivity and emplacement. The first, Otto Joachim's electronic piece *Katimavik,* was commissioned for Expo 67 in Montreal. It furnished the inverted nine-storey pyramid of the same name, which was the architectural showpiece of the Canadian Pavilion at Expo, with a fifteen-minute loop of Joachim's four-channel composition. The second, an improvisation of roughly the same length executed by Michael Snow and Mani Mazinani on two monophonic analog synthesizers, which they performed in September 2016 as part of the Intersection festival in Yonge-Dundas Square in Toronto. Although they bear uncanny resemblance to each other in texture, gesture, and timbre, drawing further equivalence between the two in terms of concept or practice remains fraught. Yet both bracket a particular trajectory that points to a diffusion of experimental music into increasingly quotidian spheres of audition. Listening to experimental music might be thought of as what media historian Kate Lacey has called *listening out,* an "attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition"

(2013, 8). Different from other listening contexts, we become interpellated into a relational nexus where the loci of composition, performance, and perception become unstable.

Otto Joachim's *Katimavik* was the result of the composer's prolonged research and experimentation in his own electronic music studio, the first privately owned and operated facility in Canada, built in the mid-1950s. The work is a four-channel tape piece that can be listened to online now in several places[1] and is emblematic of what Timothy D. Taylor calls postwar composition's embrace of the "technoscientific imaginary" (2001, 41)—a virile distention of avant-garde praxis into pure sound worlds of analog synthesis, ring modulation, and tape manipulation. *Katimavik* is an Inuit word for "gathering place," and at Canada's 100th birthday celebrations, this place, like all of Expo itself, was one of modernity—a futuristic space where visitors could wander in and out, and upwards along staircases to walk along the perimeter of the structure. Inside, abstract sculptural automata clung to the sloping walls, moving oddly with Joachim's piece—what one observer described as "eerie electronic music" (Stanton 2004). In a kind of oblique counterpoint to the jarring intermedial environment of sound, space, and movement, where Canada's past and present were meant to merge into a multisensory impression of the future, throngs of people moved throughout the structure, making their way on to the next site at Expo.

Joachim could scarcely have been a more appropriate choice for *Katimavik* and Expo's zeitgeist: a German Jew who fled the oncoming terror of Nazism in the 1930s, finding a new home in cosmopolitan Montreal following years of circumambulation, Joachim had become a central figure in the city's musical establishment as an instrument builder, electroacoustic explorer, and modernist leader in composition. *Katimavik,* described by composer and critic Udo Kasemets as "muscular," was conceived as an integral part of the pyramid's architectural space: "Few people could have done better justice to this acoustical setting," Kasemets writes, which fit the environment "like a glove" (1975, 105). It is also a site of noticeable auditory distraction, where the fruits of Joachim's hermetic research into electronic sound amount to little beyond "eerie sounds."

In his book *Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure* eldritch Priest addresses this unintentional (or un-attentional?) kinship between experimental music and the *trompe-l'oreille* of ambient listening. He describes a scene where he and his spouse sit, bleary eyed, sipping coffee at seven o'clock in the morning at the airport in advance of an early flight. Amidst the "echoic" din of boarding announcements, shuffling of commuters, and the "susurrations" of espresso machines, Priest focuses his attention on what to him appears to be an aggressively minimalist duet for saxophone and drums played in coffee shop's speakers—what he describes as repeated staccato

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[1]   Joachim's composition is heard in the Marc Beaudet's short film *The Canadian Pavilion, Expo 67,* from roughly 12 minutes and 35 seconds to 14 minutes (Baudet, 1967); the piece it can also be accessed via the Canadian Music Centre's online streaming archive of recordings, CentreStreams (http://musiccentre.ca/centrestreams).

shards of sound assailing the early morning travellers. After pointing out the oddly experimental sound curation to his partner, she quickly explains that the CD on the stereo was just skipping, relaying a "digital stutter" as it passed "glacially through a scratch on its surface" (2013, 115). With this anecdote Priest makes a move for describing the "reality-effects" (116) produced by listening's transductive organizing of vibrating matter, frozen in its paroxysm of dysfunction, into something mesmeric. And importantly, for Priest it is the attentional economy of distraction and of the interplay between sound and ambience, or the musical object's amplitudinal hovering at our perceptual fringe that creates these world-producing scenarios.

In short, Priest is making a case for a kind of listening particular to experimental music, where form and all of the anticipatory listening manoeuvres associated with structural perception of sound do not make much sense—indeed, why listening intently and without distraction, for example, to all fifteen minutes of Otto Joachim's *Katimavik* might not be particularly satisfying. Putting it concisely, he says, "Listening is rarely drawn in structural terms, and … contemporary conditions have made listening radically partial and precariously coherent" (2013, 122). These conditions—relational, technological, meditational, and so on—impress upon what David Cecchetto and Priest elsewhere describe as the concert hall's virtuality, or its increasing abstraction into something more and more unreal; that is, more than an actual place where people go to listen to music, it exerts its greatest influence as an "alibi" for music's authenticity and object-status (2013, 210). When we listen, as they illustrate, to a string quartet on the radio or online, it is more than likely that that specific material with which we interface as listeners has never existed in such a space. The semiosis, cultural posturing, and intra-aural regimes of "shutting up" (211), as they phrase it, imposed upon a listening body in the sacrosanct space of concert ritual, become reverberant ghosts of the "summons" (211) to attention.

But here is where experimental music offers us an especially profitable means of transacting subjectivity and staking a claim to embodied and relational spaces. As do Priest and Cecchetto (as well as many others), we can usefully consider Cage's *4'33"* as the moment at which these conditions are made sensible—where experimental music's purchase on the idea of the ethical and aesthetic subject takes hold through a variety of inversions and dispersals. As Kate Lacey has argued, to listen is "at the heart of what it means to be *in* the world, to be active, to be political" (2013, 163). The fundamental distinction, as she suggests, between the *viva contemplativa* and *viva activa* lies in our disposition either towards or away from silence—the shuttering of our ears from the noise of everyday life. Her point, in the main, is to challenge participatory tropes of democratic citizenship that rely on our right to "speak up," to "have our voices heard," and so on, by considering the public sphere as a dis-unified plurality of irreducible intersubjectivity. And this plurality, made of listeners, and not speakers, enacts agency by facilitating speech through listening—that is, by the "active decision to participate in the discursive address" (172)—"Listening Out."

David Novak's well-known writing on experimental techniques of listening, distinguished from the idea of listening to experimental music, in Japan's *kissaten* (or coffeehouses for listening to jazz and later noise music) compellingly makes a case for the active cultivation of social identities and personal subjectivities through such activities. While a comparison between the Canadian scene and Japan's ambivalent postwar embrace of international musical culture can go only so far, Novak makes one point that resonates: that listening, and the sites in which it happens, is marked by transience, by plurality; and, in complexifying an otherwise self-evident truth about listening, that authenticity and meaning, when loosed in the messy wilds of auditory experience, become critically destabilized and negotiated, to assemble in new and vibrant configurations. "Listening," he writes, "is not the final link of a chain of musical transmission, but the very crucible of innovation" (2008, 15–16).

But we must also recognize that the very notion of public and private are no longer distinguishable from one another as simple binaries: although this article focuses primarily on two examples of traditionally "public listenings" to experimental music—where cohorts of bodies assemble in collective audition in a fixed time and space—the possibilities for private publicness have become vastly elaborated. Experimental music has made innumerable incursions into everyday life. The network of alternative artist–run centres that have proliferated since the 1970s (known once as the Parallel Galleries, bannered for a time under the lobbying of advocacy organization ANNPAC)[2] became crucial sites for local and regional growth in experimentalism across the arts. Spaces that availed themselves of increased funding at federal and provincial levels began to reclaim curatorial agendas from private and commercial galleries, allowing for a proliferation of inter-arts pollination in ways that did not exist in 1967, when Joachim realized *Katimavik* for listeners at Expo.[3] One of the earliest of these, Open Space in Victoria, became the first to program experimental music in 1972 as part of its Open Eye Open Ear festival. Over the course of two weeks, cross-genre performances of new works occurred in its spacious second-floor gallery in downtown Victoria, including what might have been the first complete public performance of Erik Satie's proto-experimental *Vexations* in Canada.[4]

Toronto's Music Gallery, now a prestigious and established space for creative musical presentation, began its life in late 1975 as a semi-furnished (and poorly heated) space on St. Patrick Street—a kind of clubhouse where the free improvisation ensemble CCMC could play twice weekly. These early CCMC performances amounted to something more (and less) than a concert: they became a kind of habitus for the musicians, where the creative labour of collective

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[2] The Association for National Non-Profit Artist Centres, which existed between 1976 and 1994.

[3] Art historian Clive Robertson has authoritatively written on the impact of artist-run centres in Canada from the 1970s through to the mid-1990s. See Robertson (2006), esp. 1–60.

[4] On the calendar of events, the performance is listed as the "third world performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*." On the contrary, at least twelve complete performances had taken place in North America and Europe by 1972, according to Gavin Bryars (1983, 15–17)—including a *solo* performance by Richard Toop at the Arts Lab in London, 1967, which lasted twenty-four hours (14).

improvisation—which they considered a particularly Canadian contribution to creative music (Stewart 2000, 7; Miller 1979, 13)—could unfold outside the domain of the commercial economy of performance. As recently as 2008, the now-defunct Somewhere There reclaimed the demimonde of casual experimentalism offered by the Music Gallery's first maverick years—trombonist Scott Thomson's loft in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood blurred the gap between public and private musical spaces, where listeners could sit quite literally in his living room on any given night of the week to informal performances of musics that fell within the porous ambit of experimental music.[5] Listening to music at Somewhere There was, I argue, a very particular mode of relational listening—where the "summons" to a regime of "shutting up" abutted the disarming intimacy of silent plurality: a commons of intersubjectivity that was amplified by peregrine listening, by musics with no ending, by performances of experimental musicians whose fleeting groupings were as ephemeral as the sounds they offered.

But experimental music's ambivalence, or precarity, lies in its simultaneous ontology as both process and object, which is always being negotiated between performers and listeners. This precarity becomes foregrounded when this negotiation occurs in unlikely venues of audition, exemplified by Michael Snow and Mani Mazinani's performance in September 2016 in Yonge-Dundas Square. For the last ten years, the Intersection festival has turned Yonge-Dundas Square into a public site of listening to new music. During the seasonal months of the year, concerts happen frequently at Yonge-Dundas, but Intersection—which is organized mainly by Contact Contemporary Music in partnership with a number of other new music presenters—curates programming that most often finds itself sheltered within performance infrastructures that have remained essentially invisible to wider audiences. In 2015, John Oswald (known most famously for *Plunderphonics,* also a long-time member of CCMC) presented his piece *Spectre* as part of Intersection. *Spectre* was commissioned in 1990 by Kronos Quartet and is scored for "1001 string reflections"—the piece calls for literally hundreds of overdubs of the same sound to create a massive timbral swarm of glissandi, tremolo, and other techniques. Playing on the name of the inventor of the "wall of sound" studio production method, "recordings of Kronos," to quote Oswald, "fill *Spectre*" (1990, [2]). But at Intersection, Oswald put out a public call for string players of all abilities to participate in the performance, and while he didn't quite get his #1000 strings (hashtagged as such in promotion for the event), the square was filled with bodies engaged in participatory performance. Quoting Joe Strutt, who recorded the performance for his archival blog *Mechanical Forest Sound,* "Standing in the middle of it all created quite a surround-sound experience, which is hard to reproduce here [on the posted audio file]—as is the visual experience of seeing the mass of players

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5 See chapters by both Scott Thomson (175–83) and Allan Stanbridge (184–96) in Heble and Wallace (2013) for, respectively, personal and critical reflections on the operation of Somewhere There in Toronto.

slowly lift their bows from the strings to bow the air above them …. The loudest section sounds like a cloud of white noise" (2015).

Where *Spectre* availed itself of the affordances of the square to quite literally fill the space with erstwhile performers similar to previous instances of mass "jam sessions" on guitar and saxophone that had occurred there[6] respectively, Snow and Mazinani's short performance was a particularly different kind of commentary on experimentalism's intervention into the contours of everyday life. To recount my own experience as a listener: out of the hundreds of people passing through the square, perhaps thirty were huddled around Snow and Mazinani—their synths were set up perpendicular to each other in the main thoroughfare, and not on the stage. Their performance began without introduction, and the improvisation simply started, perhaps before it was immediately evident to listeners.

We might consider this as a different kind of listening "summons" that has become a trope in free improvisation, where the labour of improvisation does not commence as much as it resumes, unannounced, from some previously interrupted moment. Not only does this perform an exnomination of music as object (a ubiquitous move within discourses of free improvisation), it also elides the segmentation between "performing" and "not performing" upon which we as listeners rely frequently in auditory experiences of liveness. But as the two moved into their sparring extemporizations, the sound became an increasingly environmental texture akin to what Anahid Kassabian has described as music's "sourcelessness" (2013, 39), coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Here is where experimental music's investiture in distributed authorship and the destabilization of auditory expectations cluster awkwardly around the performing bodies of Snow and Mazinani. Their invisibilization as performers, achieved to noticeable effect, recalls the absent Joachim, whose composition looped endlessly into the *Katimavik* fifty years ago, annihilating any of its overtures into form.

But in both cases, I argue, a kind of relational nexus emerges constellated among a listening plurality, aural ambiguity, and the "irreducible" intersubjectivety binding it to place. Where Lacey imagines listening as a potential means for enacting democratic modes of citizenship in a disappearing *actual* public sphere, here I assert that this potentiality is made vivid in experimental music's radical contingency: that in relocating these marginal sounds from the cultural penumbrae to the public commons, there is something more happening than just weird music being performed. The examples discussed here in this brief article are just a few out of countless others of experimentalism's wandering out of the shadows and into the open, summoning us to listen anew, even if we are not sure where we are headed while we wait for the ending.

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6 In 2009, the Luminato festival attempted to break the Guinness World Record for the largest guitar ensemble: over 1600 musicians filled the square to perform Neil Young's "Helpless" (which fell short of the record). In 2004, Richard Underhill and his group the Shuffle Demons assembled approximately 900 saxophonists to play the *Hockey Night in Canada* theme song in a similar endeavour.

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ABSTRACT

In 2016 Michael Snow and Mani Mazinani improvised on vintage analog synthesizers in Yonge-Dundas Square, filling Toronto's busiest commercial commons with retro-futuristic sonic filigree; almost fifty years earlier, Otto Joachim's four-channel electronic sound installation *Katimavik* furnished the Canadian Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal with uncannily similar sounds. In both cases, listeners perambulated amongst a sonic-spatial architecture defined by publicness and auditory plurality. In the intervening decades, non-profit artist-run centres proliferated across the country,

offering refuge for local experimentalists to develop their craft in the name of region-al and national cultural growth. Such is experimental music's longstanding position on the margins and centres of listening in Canada: its history as a niche practice is replete with attempts to insert itself into the everyday. I argue that the diffusion of experimental music into increasingly quotidian spheres in Canada offers a way to understand how place is engendered through the intersubjectivity of listening—an act implicated in a range of agentive processes. Different from other listening contexts, in listening to experimental music we become interpellated into a relational nexus where the loci of composition, performance, and perception become distributive and unstable. I thus suggest that listening to experimental music in Canada can be thought of as a "listening out" an "attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition." The examples serve as case studies for refiguring the engagement between creative music and the commons in Canada—what experimental music can "mean in the world."

RÉSUMÉ

En 2016, Michael Snow et Mani Mazinani ont improvisé sur d'anciens modèles de syn-thétiseurs analogues sur le Yonge-Dundas Square, remplissant un des espaces publics et commerciaux les plus occupés de Toronto avec un filigrane sonore rétro-futuriste. Près de cinquante ans plus tôt, l'œuvre *Katimavik* d'Otto Joachim — une installation sonore électronique à quatre pistes — animait, avec des sons étrangement semblables, le pavillon du Canada à l'Expo 67 de Montréal. Dans les deux cas, les auditeurs étai-ent invités à déambuler au sein d'une architecture sonore et spatiale caractérisée par ses dimensions publiques et plurielles. Durant les décennies ayant séparé ces deux événements, les centres d'artistes auto-gérés à but non lucratif ont proliféré à travers le Canada, accueillant ainsi les expérimentateurs locaux cherchant à poursuivre leur démarche créative, au nom du développement culturel régional et national. La longue histoire canadienne des pratiques en musique expérimentale, aussi bien aux marges que dans ses centres d'écoute, abonde en tentatives d'insérer cette musique dans la vie quotidienne. Nous avançons que la diffusion de la musique expérimentale au Canada dans des espaces toujours plus en lien avec le quotidien nous permet de comprendre comment l'espace peut est généré à travers l'intersubjectivité de l'écoute — un acte im-pliqué dans une variété de processus actifs. Lors de l'écoute de musique expérimentale, bien différente d'autres contextes d'écoutes, l'auditeur est saisi par un réseau de rela-tions dans lequel les lieux de composition, de performance et de réception deviennent ponctuels et instables. Nous proposons donc que l'écoute de musique expérimentale au Canada peut être pensé comme une « écoute vers l'extérieur », ou comme une « dis-position d'attention, d'anticipation et de communication ». Certains exemples y sont considérés comme des études de cas, afin de redéfinir l'interaction entre la musique créative et le public canadien, ou autrement dit, ce que peut représenter la présence de la musique expérimentale « dans le monde ».

BIOGRAPHY

Jeremy Strachan is an SSHRC postdoctoral fellow and visiting scholar in the Depart-ment of Music at Cornell University. His research on modernism, experimentalism,

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