

Walls of Sound

Notes for the compact disc recording of Ulrich Krieger (O.O. Discs)

James Pritchett

Sounds that are continuous: refrigerators, power transformers, computer fans, fluorescent lights; the heat pump, the attic fan, the neighbor's air conditioner; the spring peepers; distant traffic, tornado sirens, high-flying jets; a tree full of grackles, another full of starlings, and another full of house sparrows; lawn mowers and leaf blowers. A continuous sound defines the space that it occupies; it is not just an acoustic phenomenon. It has a center and a radius and an intensity curve that peaks at the center and trails off to the edges. Place two drones into a space and then you have the interpenetration of their domains. Does the sound change? Or is it unchanging? Does it move? Or is it unmoving? These are not simple questions. Where is the threshold of change? If the fundamental were to change from C to C-sharp, we call it change, but if it is a tiny fluctuation, is that change? "Where there is nothing but One, nothing but One is to be seen." [Meister Eckhart] Eckhart speaks of "One" often, which he distinguishes from "one". The elements of musical continuity that we are used to—melody and harmony above all—are connected to language. There are discrete units (pitches, chords) that can be

linked in a series. Syntax is thus the medium of linear communication. A continuous sound communicates, but is not made of discrete components. It has no syntax and is not linear. "My eye and God's eye are one and the same—one in seeing, one in knowing, and one in loving." [Eckhart again; the same could be said of the ear] Given: a detailed visual image. It might be a decorative pattern, a large painting full of detail, a panoramic view. As I take it in, my eye scans over and over it, reading the details. Given: a detailed (continuous) sonic image. It might be one the pieces on this disc. I am inside of it all at once, the details acting upon me, revealing themselves to me. The way of the ear is a different exploration, a different journey. It is a way that transports me rapidly to the state of identification with the image. "Where there is nothing but One, nothing but One is to be seen." My eye detects; my ear receives. Cage was the one who said that there was no silence, there was only sound; silence he defined as sound not intended. But, rather than nonintention, what if the distinction is nonat-

John Cage's *Four*⁵ is written for saxophone quartet "or multiples thereof." Ulrich Krieger has recorded all four parts five times each and superimposed them for this presentation.

This approach has a paradoxical result. Although the tones themselves are sturdier—humming and throbbing as a result of the minute pitch differences within the unisons—the fivefold multiplication of this piece doesn't make it any thicker than it was to begin with. Sure, the sound is more continuous than it might have been otherwise, but Cage's silence in these late works is only incidentally related to the pauses produced. Each individual sound is so perfectly set in the center of an infinite silence that you could add them on top of each other thousands of thousands of times over and never get even the slightest sense of solidity.

James Tenney's *Saxony*: the harmonic series. What more do I need to say? What else is there in this piece? Everything else there is to hear in it comes forth from this one fact: that fundamentals produce overtones in fixed proportions.

Much of James Tenney's music has this quality of fact about it. Some facts are just beautiful in themselves, expressive in themselves, engaging in themselves. We behold this thing happening and, even though we know—Tenney knows—the exact boundaries of the thing, even though it is mathematically precise, it is as if we had no idea of it at all. We sit on the edge of our chairs as each partial appears, and are amazed.

The last fundamental—the really low one—isn't even sounding; it's below the range of the instrument. But as the saxophonist adds one overtone to another (via the delay system), this low phantom sum appears, like a mirage. It's an illusion produced from truth, from fact; it is the transcendent beauty of mathematics made physical.

attention? Silence is sound not attended to; when you turn your mind, there it is all around you. While walking in silence—in the country or city, anywhere at all, really—we pay attention and then the sound begins. Perhaps this is a composer's role: to command our attention. Eckhart on hearing and seeing: "For the power to hear the eternal word is within me and the power to see will leave me; for hearing I am passive, and seeing I am active." Eckhart on One and many: "If you are wholly that One, you shall remain so, even where distinctions are. Different things will all be parts of that One to you and will no longer stand in your way. The One remains the same One in thousands of thousands of stones as much as in four stones." It might be that you are hearing a sound but are unaware of it, hearing a change but are not perceiving it. With continuous sounds this is common; your attention comes and goes, focuses and blurs. When you are not attending to it, it is silence, but when you are it is sound. Sounds lurk in the shadows of our hearing, living unheard lives until something happens to us to make us aware of them—they cross the threshold. Eckhart is keenly aware that hearing brings in; hearing requires receptivity; to hear well we must perfect ourselves. He is speaking of listening when he says that "we are made perfect by what happens to us." In sculpture the space between two objects is negative space; in music the space between two drones is additive (beating, overtones, subtones). The personal sounds we carry around with us: the wind past my ears; my heartbeat, my

breath (in, out, in, out, in, out); Cage's nervous system in operation and his blood circulating (the anechoic chamber story); footsteps, brushing arms and legs; ringing in the ears, crackling of the joints, gurglings in the stomach. A drone is a sound that does not move, but may change. Or it may be unchanging and unmoving: a static fact. You could also have a sound that does not change, but then your mind changes and it becomes a different sound for you. If one or more of the overtones of a drone emphasizes itself, suddenly or slowly, is this a change, a movement, or neither? Is the sound still just the same, unmoving underneath it all? The drone permeates space (this we know) but it also permeates time—constant and unmoving even while changing—a living entity. There is a permanence to it that is transformative. "Our

Lord speaks in the prophet Hosea: 'I will allure her—the soul of the aristocrat—into the wilderness and there speak to her heart'—that is, One to one, one from One, one in One and the One in one, eternally." [Meister Eckhart] Where

In Joseph Celli's Video Sax there is the addition of the performer to himself six times over; the piece is not intended to be performed by a sextet of six, but by a sextet of one.

But beyond the addition taking place in the vertical domain, there is also the horizontal additions of one tone repeated over and over, one scale repeated over and over. Repeated tones extend the sound while animating it from within by the irregular lengths of the tones. It is like building up a single line by brushing over it in short strokes. And what about a scale? A scale figure played over and over ceases to be a pattern with a direction, but becomes a static pattern, a stroke, evenly covering a space.

Adding these strokes to each other six times over, you get something that doesn't seem vertical (harmony or counterpoint), but which is a layering: two-dimensional, only thicker (like a painting).

there is nothing but One, nothing but One is to be heard. Eckhart defines One: "What does 'One' mean? Something to which nothing is to be added." A large painting takes up space on the wall; it is a

two-dimensional space, even when textured. A sound takes up a three-dimensional space, located as it is at a specific point: near or close, right or left, up or down. And as it goes in time, it begins to occupy a four-dimensional space, swelling and fading, thinning and thickening, its overtones evolving, its pitch rising and falling. Sounds that are continuous: the wind in the spruce tree before a storm, the wind blowing past the car window as I drive, the wind in the spruce tree after a storm; the water running down the gutter, rain on the roof, the creek under the bridge; the wood chipper, the sump pump, the humidifier. We can't escape sound, not even in sleep. We turn it on and off and on and off by opening and closing our minds to it: on, off, open, close, sound, silence. The personal sounds we carry around with us: breathing in, breathing out; the bits of songs, heard or made up, that go around in my head; the sounds heard in dreams, either invented or seeping in from the outside world (so that when we awaken we have a moment of confusion, then recognition); breathing in, breathing out; in winter, the memory of crickets; breathing

Most instruments are the products of human construction; the didjeridu is not. An Australian aboriginal instrument, it is nothing more or less than a tree branch that has been hollowed out by termites. Its origin alone should make one wake up and pay attention when it is played. An instrument that is found, not made, is anonymous, universal, owned by no one. Any sound that comes from it, therefore, is also found, not made—owned by no one, it comes from nowhere.

Phil Niblock's *Didjeridoos and don'ts* gets its imagery from this instrument. To a certain degree, we do not even care who is performing or who wrote it—the didjeridu so commands our attention. The sound of the hollow branch is the perfect image of the instrument, of the anonymous forces that created it through a gradual process of subtraction. Each didjeridu is individual, unique, single-minded, inescapable.

In Niblock's work its sound has been recorded and manipulated, then layered with the playing of the live didjeridu. Even so, the sound is of the one image; it still sounds like the one didjeridu. Adding the sound of the didjeridu to itself is like adding nothing to nothing; you could continue indefinitely and still wind up with exactly the same sound.

in, breathing out; a sound I remember, a sound I can't quite remember, a sound I can't get out of my mind; in summer, the memory of cold winds; the sound I make when I blow into my hands to warm them up; sotto voce whistles and humming while I work, think, write, cook, rest; a sound I wish that I heard, but can't quite force into existence. The fundamental: the primary frequency of a tone, the one underlying the overtones, the one frequency to which all other tones relate. The fundamental: the One of sound. A strong fundamental persists even when all we hear are overtones. In fact, if the overtones are there, our mind (or is it our soul?) will provide the fundamental for us. The fundamental: that with which we are identified when we are identified with the sonic image. The fundamental: the roots of the sonic plant. The fundamental: that which I think of as the base of my spine, my feet on the ground, the physical sonic presence that stakes my hearing to this spot and moves out through the rest of my body. One possible way to look at it is that there is only one sound that is present all the time, and that what we hear is just the filtering of that one sound by all the phenomena of life and the universe, just as there is only the one wind playing the many instruments of the world as it blows. A tree, some tall dry grasses, a bamboo grove, and an open window will all filter the wind differently, making different sounds. What does the one sound sound like? "The One remains the same One in thousands of thousands of stones as much as in four stones. . . . What does 'One' mean? Something to which nothing is to be added."

About this text:

This text was written in the spring of 1997 to accompany the compact disc Walls of Sound, featuring performances by saxophonist Ulrich Krieger. The quotations from Meister Eckhart are taken from the translation by Raymond Blakney.

The disc is available from O. O. Discs, issue # OO32. O. O. Discs can be reached at 261 Groovers Avenue, Black Rock, CT 06605-3452, USA.

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