

The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century

By Alex Ross
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ALEX
ROSS

“Art is not a mirror. Art is a hammer.” This is one of my favorite quotes, though its origin is unclear. Many sources credit German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht with a version of the quote, while others attribute it to Russian futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky, or even to an anonymous scrawl on a whiteboard at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Its meaning may be equally ambiguous. Is art a hammer with which to build new realities and ideas? Or is it a tool with which to smash existing perceptions? For centuries, master artists have done both—bending and breaking rules to craft new visions of reality. Works that adhere unswervingly to accepted norms, and unquestioningly reflect the prevailing world view, at best rise to the level of craft; at their worst, they are called theory assignments. So what happens to art when the world itself undergoes cycles of runaway destruction and social and technological revolution, as it did in the twentieth century?

In *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, Alex Ross has written a tour de force that untangles the web of twentieth-century music as it winds, twists, and splinters its way across the contorted landscape of twentieth-century history. It was a century marked by the advent of mechanized war, social revolution, and emergent technologies that offered unprecedented global connection alongside the threat of complete annihilation. Meanwhile, composers wrestled against the conventions of the late Romantic period while plumbing the depths of dissonance and new forms that would greet listeners’ ears with works of both sublime beauty and crushing ugliness. The music and history at times stand

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in reflection, and at others, in opposition. The author does a great service to both in his telling of their respective histories as inseparably linked.

The Rest Is Noise is divided into three chronological parts: 1900–1933, 1933–1945, and 1945–2000. Part I begins with the zenith of the late Romantic period in the works of Wagner that are both lionized and rebelled against by the young Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. As the twentieth century dawns, these two luminaries succeed in expanding the old form to its breaking point and introducing cracks of dissonance, subject, and form that later would become chasms. In both the musical and historical realms, the early 1900s were ripe for revolution. Perhaps more vividly than at any other time does art’s hammer-like qualities of destruction and creation show itself than in a young Stravinsky’s convolution of classical ideas of rhythm and tonality,

along with Schoenberg’s rejection of functional harmony altogether with his pioneering of serialism. As society witnessed the unprecedented destructive force of World War I, so too were these early works looked upon with initial horror, later acclaim, and eventually a factionalization that mirrored the shattered political landscape of Europe at that time.

Part II delves fascinatingly into the totalitarian regimes that tried to co-opt these factions of musicians and other artists as the world spiraled once again into war. Composers of the period lived and worked in an ever-shifting landscape of ideology in which their works might be acclaimed by the State one day and on the next, they find themselves on the way to the death camps or a Siberian gulag. Though spared the gravest of threats, even American composers found their own work subject to political whim. Artists supported under FDR’s New Deal by way of the WPA often found their politics under scrutiny during the McCarthy era a few short years later. In Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, some of the more politically adept composers like Richard Strauss and Dmitri Shostakovich were able to maneuver the twisted landscape and survive. Few were able to remain politically ambiguous or find escape. Many more had their lives cut short on the battlefields or death camps of World War II and remain tragically unknown.

Part III begins with the end of World War II, and while much of the music and its influence remain rooted in Europe and the United States, no metaphor is quite so fitting to the post-war musical atmosphere as the splitting of the atom demonstrated in the devastating bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Composers even fancied

themselves after nuclear physicists, dressing in lab coats and working in “laboratories” annihilating rhythm, melody, harmony, and even sound itself, while synthesizing new creations using emergent electronic technologies. Ideas of the functions of these old and new elements split apart and created chain reactions among ever-mutating camps of composers. This expanding cloud of composition reached out to use any element it could find and embraced cultures far beyond the shores of Europe and North America.

A bystander might view much of the musical composition that emerged in the last half of the twentieth century as pure noise (or pure silence in the case of John Cage’s 4’33”) and of little consequence

to any culture outside its own. Nothing could be further from the truth. Stockhausen’s electronic noise and tape loops found their way into the psychedelic music of the 1960s. Jazz increasingly embraced dissonance and atonality while exerting its own influence over art music of its day. Today, no self-respecting science fiction or horror film would be seen without its soundtrack pulled from avant-garde works like those of Boulez, Messiaen, and Ligetti. And the minimalism of Reich and Glass can be heard influencing the rock, pop, dance, and hip-hop music found across the radio dial.

In *The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross has crafted a book of amazing depth and scale. With copious musical analyses in

addition to a carefully considered list of suggested listening, Ross gives the reader the potential for many hours of enlightening listening and reading. *The Rest Is Noise* is exhaustive and informative enough to be used as a text for a college course on twentieth-century music, yet it is engaging enough to be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in the destructive and redemptive nature of the music and history of the twentieth century. ■

David Thaxton is a music teacher at Donner Springs Elementary School in Reno, Nevada, and is a member of The Orff Echo Editorial Board.



Tap, Tap...
(WHO'S THERE?)

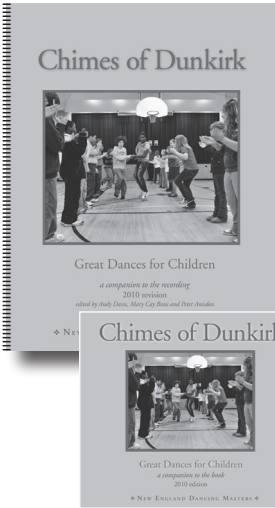
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