

# Sound Studies: Framing Noise

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Cowell, in a cosmological description, refers to the work of John Cage as an 'aggregate of materials of sound that cohere, making a tiny world of their own, much as physical elements find themselves joined together in a meteorite': a 'shower of meteors of sound' (1970: 95).

*'a shower of meteors of sound'*<sup>1</sup>

In a 1937 lecture, John Cage issued his now commonplace statement: 'Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating' (1961: 3). Just four years earlier, Cage was studying with Henry Cowell at The New School, where German composer Hanns Eisler was also teaching. In 1928 Eisler had written: 'When you are composing and you open the window, remember that the noise of the street is not mere noise, but is made by man' (1978: 30). In a later interview Cage returned to the theme:

I had the lights turned out and the windows open. I advised everybody to put on their overcoats and listen for half an hour to the sounds that came in through the window, and then to add to them – in the spirit of the sounds that are already there, rather than in their individual spirits. That is actually how I compose. I try to act in accord with the absence of my music.  
(1982: 176)

The purpose of this exercise is not to locate the origin of a now well-circulated idea; it is simply to hear the words of two composers describing what it means to study music within an 'entire field of sound', outside conventional distinctions between music and non-music, noise and sonority. It is not surprising that sound studies would begin in elemental studies of its rational language: music. Yet what might be surprising is that this circulation of ideas took place not in a conservatory, but at The New School, an institution founded by dissident, radical scholars, refugees from the increasingly authoritarian culture of Columbia University. At around the same time, young radical American composers called for the rejection of European musical idealism and, in the voice of Aaron Copland, instead embraced a modern music that would be 'principally the expression in terms of enriched musical language of a new

spirit of objectivity, attuned to our times' (Copland 1941: 18). The New School *listened*.

In 1927, Copland was appointed to the faculty and organised the famous Copland-Sessions series of lectures and concerts. The series brought recognition to a new American music – to Copland and Roger Sessions, and to other composers, including Roy Harris, Virgil Thompson, and Walter Piston. Copland's appointment to the faculty was followed by those of musicologist Charles Seeger and composers Henry Cowell, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Toch. Copland's jazz influences, Eisler's worker's songs and twelve-tone music and Cowell's non-Western musical influences privileged innovation and multi-disciplinarity that displaced European musical idealism. This experimental approach not only realised *in praxis* the radical ideals of The New School's founders, but it also modeled the interdisciplinarity that would influence curricular planning. This was not a 'music school'. It was a school where musical performance and listening collaborated with dance, film, visual art and architecture.

In 1928, when The New School's townhouse headquarters on West 23rd Street in Manhattan were slated for demolition, its president Alvin Johnson sought to create a new structure that captured the institution's progressive approach to education. He commissioned modernist architect and theatrical set designer Joseph Urban to design The New School's new home at 66 West 12th Street. On the ground floor of that building, the first International Style structure in New York, was the egg-shaped Tishman Auditorium – an acoustical achievement in its own right, but also a rehearsal for Urban's Radio City Music Hall. The rounded ceiling presented acoustical challenges, which designers overcame by hanging concentric plaster rings from the ceiling, a strategy later employed at Radio City (Landmarks Preservation Commission: 1997). While Tishman marked a milestone in modern acoustics, The New School's scholars were engaging in groundbreaking research on modern sounds and sound technologies. The New School Film Music Project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and conducted by Eisler and Theodor Adorno, sharply criticised the synthesis of music and image in Hollywood film. Cage's now-famous lectures on experimental music in the late 1950s literally tore music apart, reconceiving it in terms of space and noise.

Sound Studies is in the DNA of The New School, at the core of its radical pedagogy. This modern cognitive practice has yielded an interdisciplinary approach to sound studies, where theory listens to and thinks the world through praxis, and praxis takes on the character of theory in response to its objective historical and technological moment.

### Sound as an Interdisciplinary Field of Praxis

In a panel discussion at the 2007 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, music and communication scholars discussing ‘The Future of Sound Studies’ generally agreed that sound scholarship within film studies was pioneering in its rejection of an ocular-centric approach to the medium, but that ‘sound studies’ is more than the study of *film* sound. Sound, several panellists argued, can be addressed through the humanities and the social sciences and even the physical sciences. History, psychology, physiology, audiology, environmental science – all have something to say about sound.

Looking to existing programs in visual studies can prove instructive as we design new sound studies curricula. Many recently-constituted Visual Studies programs are situated between their universities’ existing programs of art history and studio art or visual design – a position that reflects the multidisciplinary focus advocated by proponents of sound studies, and that acknowledges that an understanding of vision arises not only from looking and developing the critical faculties and language to discuss what’s seen, but also from learning how to make and manipulate images.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that visual studies benefits from, and indeed embodies, the privileged status of ocular-centrism that limits much art and visual media scholarship: what visual studies overlooks – or, rather, overhears – is precisely that which sound studies must sound out.

A sound studies program within media studies opens up investigation and experimentation to encompass a wide variety of media formats, yet there is much about sound that media studies *cannot* adequately address. It is therefore important that such a program acknowledge those other disciplines that contribute to our understanding, creation, and control of sound – and that we explore potential intersections with these other fields of study and practice. At The New School, our Sound Studies curriculum therefore begins with a core course, ‘Fundamentals of Sound Studies’, that overviews philosophical, historical, and social scientific approaches to listening – from phenomenology to auditory historiography to psychoacoustics and the physiology of listening – and the history of mediated sound.

Beyond this interdisciplinary grounding, a sound studies curriculum should strive to promote a critical awareness of listening and the sounds one listens to. It must encourage students to consider sounds, both those we hear passively and actively, and those we create ourselves, as interpretable phenomena that are culturally, historically, and situationally determined. Beginning with the most rational and intentional of sounds, curriculum developers should ensure that a sound studies curriculum

<sup>2</sup> In 2004 the History of Art Department at the University of Pennsylvania launched a new undergraduate Visual Studies major; the articulated objectives for this program effectively grapple with the many challenges that sound studies advocates have set forth for their own nascent field; see Penn Visual Studies Program, at: <http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/vlst/program.html>

includes courses that address music from cultural and critical studies perspectives, and as a media form. A study of non-musical sound art might warrant a separate class. One or two courses could be devoted to sound and image – not only movie music, but also sound in television, video games, cell phones, and other screen-based media. An additional course could focus on language and the voice, exposing students to the myriad linguistic theories that inform sound interpretation and criticism. Acknowledging the unique opportunities presented by living and learning in a vibrant urban laboratory, we at The New School offer a team-taught, hybrid ‘theory/practice’ course on ‘Sound and Space’ that addresses the relationships between sound, architecture, and the city landscape. Our discussions range from architectural acoustics, to acoustic ecology and noise pollution, to local music scenes. Other sound studies programs could similarly develop special-topics courses that reflect institutional or local resources and interests.

Promoting the translation of theory into practice, audio production courses – whether skills-based or, ideally, integrated with historical, critical, and theoretical content – should allow students to work in documentary, narrative, and experimental formats; students’ projects in these courses could feed the university radio station. Additional project-based production courses might allow students to produce sound for other students’ films or theatre productions; to create sound installations; or to hack into sound-making objects and create their own music- or noise-emitting instruments. Some courses could be cross-listed or team-taught with the music, art, or design departments, or even with local interest or artist groups. In New York there are a plethora of outlets – from Harvestworks to Diapason Gallery to the New York Society for Acoustic Ecology – where students can engage with these ideas outside the classroom. And it is outside the classroom, through Eisler’s window, where they encounter the noise of the street and remember that they have a part in creating it.

### **(Re)Framing Noise**

As Moses stuttered, Aaron spoke. The capability of shaping noise to utter the divine word, to exert power, is nothing new. But in the twentieth century it was the innovation of shaping and then *recording* noise for mass distribution that would provide the means of exerting that power on a mass scale; an ‘official noise’ aimed at silencing, at the transformation of the attending subject into the compliant consumer. Of course these same technologies are increasingly available to consumers *as producers*:

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Attali 1985: 87–103, 133–48.

producers with the capacity to subvert the ‘official noise’ with their own noise. Attali calls this capacity for reclamation ‘Composition’.<sup>3</sup> Adorno and Eisler write of the ‘great importance of establishing an unofficial tradition of genuine art’ in combining music and moving image (1947: 116). John Cage draws our attention to the value of noise as not only a constituent part of music but also as its condition of possibility.

It is odd yet somehow accurate to consider a discipline that can trace its origins at least as far back as the Pythagoreans as an ‘emerging field’, or as ‘a field whose time has come’ (Altman 1999; Hilmes 2005). Jonathan Sterne seems exactly right in considering sound studies as conceptually fragmented (2003: 4). Given that sound has been caught up in historic sweeps ranging from great religious movements, through romanticism and idealism to find itself in the disciplinary field of repetitive capitalism, studies of sound remain conceptually fragmented and usually affect-oriented.<sup>4</sup> A sound studies curriculum must draw on its local resources to offer a critical and multidisciplinary foundation, thus affording students an opportunity to conduct the study of sound as an act of salvage, of reclamation; to help them listen, make sound, and understand the consequences of framing noise.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Disciplinary’ is used here in the Foucauldian sense.



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