The Trumpeter
ISSN 1705-9429
Volume 36, No. 1 (2020)

Mechaphony Amidst the Roaring Silence

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To curate silence and stillness in the human sphere is my deep wish so that I may hear the lives of others. To calm and tame the uncontrollable will to power embodied in the clamor of machine technology encourages a world where listening becomes second nature, in awe of the most exquisite and sophisticated creatures ever dreamed, big and small, evolving through three and a half billion years. The regenerative sympoiesis of life, an eco-poiesis of niche construction and being constructed, feels trustworthy, for these processes have no agenda other than to meander in this moment. Opening with the ecological otherness – only other insofar as we forget how it constitutes ourselves – calls for going beyond designating selves as separate units; instead relearning the skillful, careful, crafting of opening. A non-naïve opening of somatic listening balances discernment vigilant and discerning of tricksters and charlatans without losing trust in innocence.

My infant falls asleep first in Oakland, California, and then after our move, in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam, to dreams aided by a recorded electric plush white-noise soother embedded in a viscose-woven sheep doll. Instead of counting sheep, this product generates digital noises of ocean waves, rain, crickets, or birdsong. As a last resort, we turned to the soother to keep police car and ambulance sirens at bay; to ward off the disrupting rumbles of low-flying aircraft and the gunning motorcycles from waking him, which would not only break my heart for his disrupted sleep, but often cost my partner and me hours of (extra) lost sleep each night. These recorded soothing nature sounds, however artificial, bought Río and us much deserved sleep. They protected the newborn's sonic space from the cacophony of city living. Being up at all hours and observing the crickets, as well as the random odd explosion of noise in the dead of night. Such erratic biorhythms and a newfound sonic sensibility cultivated in me a devotion to ushering in an environment, an earth, where the loudest sounds we hear when we sleep are natural sounds, the sounds of birds chirping and children's laughter, cicadas and thunder.

When our society matures and such tranquility comes to pass, I shall bask in the peace: not because these sounds are my creation, but precisely because they are *nobody's* creation. The sounds of voices, of a bird's or bee's or mosquito's flight, is exactly what it is; it indexes the movement of a being. This era will usher in the end of noise and the beginning of trusting again the meaning of sound, resonance, vibration.

Early on, I taught my son the difference between sound and noise. The signal-to-noise ratio is precisely the sonic metaphor for the descent of man, the collapse of the acoustic ecology of life.

As a baby and toddler, Río was constantly distracted by helicopters buzzing low, power tools revved by house-flipping neighbors, planes, and the siren songs of ambulances. These sounds of capitalism, of progress, of the Protestant Work Ethic, are the soundtrack of the great quickening, yanking his virgin attention away from the less aggressive acoustics of birdsong, rustling leaves, and from curiosity concerning the shifting weather and its voices.

The brash noises turned him to focus on only the most jarring, the most violent elements in his environment, distracting from the subtleties of breath changes, water's splash, the buzzing beehive in the adjacent lot – sounds closer to home, to his body, and to the bodies of others. For the buzz of a helicopter has nothing to do with that of a bee. The bee's hum frequency is not only a means to an end, it contains meaning in of itself. It transmits a message forced by no body, not even the bee's, and thus is free from dissimulation; rather, it correlates directly to a biological and ecological process honed over eons by coevolution with the elements. It is the pure electricity of life, of creation beyond purpose. The bee dance, as in flight, conveys exact information, giving the bee proprioceptive feedback as to its environment, air pressure, humidity, and timespace coordinates – not instrumentally, but in swoop with the being of the bee-in-environment.

The buzz frequency of a helicopter or circular saw, however, is an epiphenomenon, an accident of the oil age, with power to burn, to waste as heat. The whine of a chainsaw only conveys how burdened a particular motor is in meeting resistance in the thing it is cutting. The cacophonic mechanical instantiation of sound, the mechaphony of the modern world has become our constant soundtrack. Scrambled harmonics of rumbling freight trucks, helicopters, constant air traffic, drones, the tools of construction sites, the whir of the blender, the crackle of electricity, the faulty wiring of light fixtures, the digital hiss of modems, wifi distortions, and communications towers; the ear-ringing beams of short-wave high-spectrum frequencies – all controlling, all accomplishing, without our best interests in mind. Or with any connection or consideration of its sonic effect on those inhabiting its environment.

In fact, the noise produced doesn't have *any* interests in mind; there is no concern for aesthetics or one's neighbors in the whine of a drivetrain or rotating motor. Simply, there is no environmental feedback. A motorcycle's engine is immune because, as non-life, it renders illegible impacts of its actions: the woken children or disturbed dreams, the glares of passerby. The lack of feedback, the one-way emitting process, leaves us in thrall to its impoverished sense of engineered inefficiency. As electrical beings, with nervous systems and porous channels sensitive to all sorts of vibration, these noises enclose us in a cocoon of responses we're often not even aware of.

The living body emerged evolutionarily from the feedback loops of our natural environment. Every sound had meaning, and no stimulation was noise. While certainly like all organisms we

tuned in to some stimuli – those important to us – and tuned out others that had little bearing on our interests and survival, those background sounds still conveyed meaningful information, even if we didn't know how to consciously decode the semiotic patterns, or didn't pay much attention to them. Some creature made that sound for some reason, as a result of evolutionary negotiations and barters going on with other cohabitating creatures and elements for countless generations. And the sounds of rain or a creek gurgling signified a particular configuration of natural phenomena according to the specific momentary contours of our surrounding habitat – insights into the pulse and verve of our local region.

But the invention of machines changed this enlivened acoustic ecology. Water mills and coal and steam power to mine, grind, and cut, soon populated Europe, then quickly spread across the planet, through the rage- and greed-fueled combustion of colonialism. The initial human reactions to encountering these lumbering mechanical beasts often manifested as varieties of horror. Poets such as Byron and Coleridge and statesmen like Jefferson and Franklin warned such unprecedentedly assaulting noises would desensitize people from the tranquility deemed essential for flourishing human beings, for the basis of sociality. This early inkling that the monotonous and random noise of mechaphony was discontinuous with the previous modes of anthrophony, let alone biophony and ecophony, presciently understood the treasure and sensitivity of the sounds constitutive of our humanity.

Sound is semiotic. Noise is not. Yet, the ear and our resonant body will still waste valuable energy attempting to decipher the meaning in noise. A bird's mating call or a thunderstorm's roll conveys meaning immediately accessible, however distant in our semiotic taxonomy. Whether important or not to the listener's present task, meaning is offered nonetheless through ecological and biological processes and always works on us, semiotically massaging us in the background. An electric or gas-powered saw's buzz, however, aside from letting the listener know that someone nearby is cutting (likely wood), has no content in the vibration itself – it is definitionally noise. Yet, our evolutionarily ancient brains refuse to just shut off because the stimuli happen to have no content. No, our trusting brains continue trying to figure out the pattern, the meaning, like an old computer futilely searching for a directory that has been misplaced. The nuisance of noise doesn't just annoy us; it holds our attention captive.

Because of its lack of meaning, its bottomless inscrutability, noise restructures our aural filtering system in a way far different than living sounds. Fighting off sonic distractions that tap into conscious attention due to their whining or rumbling frequencies is a daily task in urban environments. On my way to take out the trash every week, I would walk by a neighbor's house and suddenly lose my train of thought. I presumed I was just absent-minded, or having particular trouble concentrating. Perhaps my nutrition wasn't right, I pondered. Months later, as I was walking with my partner across that same spot, my partner pointed out how that

neighbor a few months prior had installed an ultrasonic cat deterrent radar, which made piercing high noise emissions every time someone (cat, human, or otherwise) walked by on the sidewalk in front of their yard. At first, I didn't hear it; after all, I hadn't noticed it before. After it was pointed out to me, however, every time my routine had me pass by I heard the piercing burst, and now reflexively experienced the noise weapon's visceral effect – an electric shock discharging throughout my body, paralyzing my thought. I had finally pinpointed the source of the weekly mental fragmentation. Realizing how I had on occasion beaten myself up for my failing concentration and lack of memory on those short walks, I suddenly felt defeated that I had been gaslit by a noise sensor.

A musician from childhood, trained to be sensitive to sounds, I felt even more insulted, and assaulted, by the stealth noise torture my neighbor had installed. I was confronted by the short-sighted conundrum of using technology to ward off unwanted life, often requiring aggrandizing chains of technology to deal with our progress traps, as relevant to the noise industry as any other. The sonic casualties we've grown accustomed to through inefficient design create in thermodynamic terms lots of heat – or in this case, noise – along with the work of machines. These inefficiencies of the last century have been propped up by the misleading promise of cheap fuel, infinite resources, dispensability, and throwaway culture.

Without knowing it, we have become accustomed to the din of wartime machinery in our everyday lives. Civilization's vestigial war traumas and addictive, locked-in, insecure game of technological one-upmanship have stolen the collective heritage of all humans and the more-than-human world of the still mornings and tranquil days. Because of this loss of common tranquility, we're instead prescribed diverse tranquilizers to recreate a bubble around us instead of heeding noise as a collective call for our attending to the disturbances of our earth. Always on the go, mobilizing for we-forgot-what; but it doesn't matter – for with all the buzz, we no longer have time to reflect and think. Memory is quickly becoming a thing of the past, an artifact or relic to venerate in a museum, in art, or literature, forgetting that once life was continuously aesthetic, and a good life could not be lived without beauty infusing every surface of sound.

How then, to find silence, the silence pregnant with the microsounds of life? This is the nightly question I ponder as the highway's distant roar pinches my soul, gazing at my sleeping child. The continuance of Río's broken focus when the deliberate noise of ambulances, motorcycles, or helicopters near, makes me wonder whether other of his attention-span compromised behaviors are connected to these noises. But projecting my anxieties on his expression accomplishes nothing. While I distinguish with added mental suffering between the white noise of a highway and the elemental gush of a river, Río does not; not yet, at least. So I take responsibility for the additional psychological suffering that comes with the knowledge that

mechaphony physiologically short-circuits my and Río's biology. But his biology – and mine – nonetheless experience the real and consequential effects of this difference.

When dysfunctional systems break down, the glint of occasion presents itself with open paths previously unthinkable. Many cultures traditionally have their Sabbath, but we have lost ours, only to have oddly regained it in a time of biological crisis. These days of pause, during the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, provide us with space to dream of a planetary Sabbath from mechaphony.

It might go something like this: every year, the different societies of planet Earth converge to repair unresiliencies by taking a week without machines. We turn off the switches and see what happens. We see our senses come back, strangely. Our initial meeting with this unaccustomed sensorium almost becomes suspect, nude in the absence of the layers of dissonant frequencies which allowed our proprioceptive and sensorial armoring. Akin to the biblical Jubilee, or the Maya's annual Day Out of Time, experiments in unplugging, restarting, and resting, provision us with a vantage on what we have become – the human conditioned in our modernist culture of machines. Such a breath of alive silence might allow us to relieve the existential burden of our species which yearns to remember and experience cohabitating amongst sentient, curious life; with plenty to fear from the wildness of organisms large and small, but for the first time being able to trust our ears and open our resonant body to the vulnerable unpredictable confrontation of a wild world filled with murmurs of meaning.

This dream I sustain for my beloved Río's developing sensorium, for all children's capacity to open their ears and be free, and for the child inside us wondering what it might be like to lovingly lean into every ripple of our cilia with surrender and trust.