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What's That Sound?

On any evening in the Bay Area, the highways and roads are always overrun with cars making their commute home. While stuck in the stop-and-go traffic, you decide to tune into the radio to make the situation bearable. The distinct sounds of different types of radio stations can be heard as you fiddle with the buttons on your car's radio to switch channels. The news, top 40, rock, more news, country, classical, yet another top 40 song, but on the next station, you hear nothing but a drum beating. Just a single drum being beat without any sense of rhythm or tempo. It's strange, but it catches your ear. A new rhythm-less sound is introduced to accompany the drum. It vaguely resembles the sound of a record scratch, the sound made when a needle zips across vinyl. The two sounds continue to play in tandem for the next few minutes. For a moment, you start to consider that your radio is broken, since it seems as if you're just listening to noise rather than actual music. Your car has moved a total of 20 feet since the start of this "song" and the drums and record scratching are still offbeat.

Music is universal. There's always a song or album that can be played at any given moment, everyone listens to it all the time. There's a perfect genre out there for everybody, no matter their age, gender, race, sexuality, or location. One of these many genres is experimental music. Just like any other genre, experimental music can be found easily on streaming platforms or through physical means such as CDs and vinyl records. There's an extensive amount of radio stations that

broadcast the unique songs across the nation, yet, experimental music is frequently overlooked. An article from *Fader* magazine explains that experimental music is “to speak a language that not everyone speaks yet.” In other words, experimental speaks the language of innovation.

The sounds featured in experimental music are new to the average music listener, they're different. It takes music that the public is already familiar with and expands it into something that's new and unconventional. It's a language that isn't new to the Bay Area. Some of the largest, most successful tech companies in the world are based in the Bay Area and they work towards modernizing the world as we know it every day. The language of innovation flows through these cities, transforming modern music and life as we know it.

Every song requires an instrument. For the most part, traditional songs call for the use of traditional instruments that we are all familiar with such as a guitar or a piano. Or in the case of today's modern music, the use of electronic instruments and beats is more commonly heard. But the word 'instrument' can translate to something that's noticeably different in the language of experimental. One of the most famous examples of experimental instrumentation is found in David Byrne and Brian Eno's "The Jezebel Spirit." The nearly five-minute song heavily features the live recordings of an exorcism, and as a review from *The Rolling Stone* explains, the recording of the exorcist “[fades] out before we find out what happened to the possessed woman.” Byrne and Eno's inclusion of such outlandish sounds in their song ensures that the listener will have an experience unparalleled to any other song. When asked about listening to the song, Steven Boljonis, a photographer living in Los Altos, California and has listened to experimental music since he was 15, says “it's really spooky and really amazing, and it gives me a lot of feeling.” It goes without saying that an exorcist is not a conventional instrument in the

traditional sense, but this is just one of the many innovations within the realm of experimental music.

Experimentalists have continued to innovate through instrumentation even up until today. KZSU, Stanford University's radio station, holds an annual event called Day of Noise in which the station broadcasts 24 hours of experimental music performed live from their studio. February 8th, 2020 marked the 18th year the station has held their event. Abra Jeffers, an experimental music director at KZSU, talked about some of the highlights from the event and recalled that her favorite set had "multiple vibrators being used as instruments." She continues to explain that performances such as those are examples of "pushing the envelope on instruments," which includes "sounds you've never heard in combinations you've never heard." Music wouldn't hold any special meanings if it weren't for the sounds produced by instruments, and as creatives, experimentalists strive to discover something new in making those sounds. What Bryne and Eno demonstrated 40 years ago, along with experimentalists today, are just some examples of how obscurity in instrumentation is an integral part in speaking experimental music's language.

Experimental music began to attract an audience in the United States during the 1950's. The term was first introduced in the mid-twentieth century as it rose in popularity across Europe, especially in France. The genre was first defined as a way to "denote concrete and electronic music, which was produced as a scientific 'experiment' in a sound laboratory" (Benitez 63). John Cage's 1952 composition, "4'33" (pronounced four minutes, thirty-three seconds), is most commonly cited as the piece that initiated the rise of experimentation in America. As the name would suggest, "4'33" is exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds long, but here's the catch – it's four minutes and thirty-three seconds of complete silence. Cage intended to have the

listener tune into the sounds of the world around them rather than his composition to allow them to be in the natural music of the world. The music wasn't in Cage's composition, it was in the outside sounds that could be heard during those four minutes. It challenged the long-standing idea that music brings the listener to another world. However, this message didn't reach the majority of his audience, causing a tremendous amount of uproar from the American public over a silent song. They deemed it to be a stunt and didn't consider it as real music, but at the end of the day, the focus was suddenly on experimental music. "4'33" created an extensive conversation about the logistics of the song. Whether it was appreciated or not, an entirely new genre was introduced to American society. People's ears were turned towards a new type of music, eager to hear more. While the popularity that "4'33" gained may have been controversial, NPR states, "Cage's little silent composition was no joke and it would have an incalculable, if characteristically quiet, influence on a great deal of music that came after" (Hermes).

Cage opened an entire new world with his silent composition. He put experimental under the American spotlight, encouraging artists to create more music that pushes the norm. As a result of this, artists and composers including Eno, Iannis Xenakis, Christian Wolff, Michael Nyman and many more were able to step into the world of experimental. These artists, along with the many artists that came after them, have continued to create and compose songs that fall out of the standard box of music. Experimental artists have continued to challenge the standard of music to the point where the definition of the genre has now become a "general label for any music that pushes existing boundaries and genre definitions, be it in rock, jazz, modern composition or any other style" ("Experimental Music Genre Overview").

Another key part to understanding the language of experimental is hidden within the name itself. Experimental. Because at the end of the day, experimental music is given its name based on what it actually is - an experiment. In the context of traditional science, an experiment is “an operation or procedure carried out under controlled conditions in order to discover an unknown effect or law, to test or establish a hypothesis, or to illustrate a known law,” as defined by Merriam-Webster. But when this definition is adapted to the language of experimental, it, once again, doesn’t exactly uphold the same meaning. In “From Experimental Music to Musical Experiment,” Frank X. Mauceri relies upon the sayings and ideas of composer and music theorist, Benjamin Boretz, to identify the difference between an experiment of science and one of music. Compared to the standard definition of an experiment, Mauceri explains that “composition works to distinguish events and to multiply their distinctions in contradiction to any general conception ... The composer desires that the musical phenomenon be so experientially rich as to differentiate itself and resist generalizations” (Mauceri 194). In music’s translation of the word *experiment*, the composers and artists aren’t trying to prove a theory. They are, instead, attempting to disprove a generalization by making something unconventional – something alluring.

This difference in definitions of experiment is comparable to the popular saying “It’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey.” In which, a traditional science experiment is strictly about the destination. The end goal is to prove a theory and is heavily involved in the final results rather than ruminating on the process. But for a music experiment, it’s actually more about the journey rather than the destination. For music, the whole point and eventual objective is to have conducted an experiment in the first place. While the resulting song is still imperative,

the exploration that occurs during the journey to the completed product is what's necessary.

Maria Chavez, a DJ and sound artist from Lima, Peru, has created many songs and installations of her own and is well-versed in the adventure towards a finalized project. She recalls that “the more that ‘went wrong’ the more I learned about new sound possibilities ... Accidents, chance, coincidences, to me, are the root of new beginnings in anything” (Gottschalk 411). Chavez has learned to embrace any setbacks that occur and transform it into a brand-new idea that challenges the norm. And that's okay because Jeffers explains that during the production, or experimenting, phase “there's room for changing things up because that's what experimental music is about.”

The purpose of what would be the procedure in the common science lab has now become to create and discover new methods of producing sounds in the studio. In order to create something new, the artists must come up with and incorporate new sounds, making it truly innovative.

No matter how vibrant the language of experimental music may be, the fact that many people tend to overlook the genre still stands. To put it simply, it's overlooked because, by definition, experimental music is different. Boljonis draws on his personal observations to explain that experimentation is “going to be different than what you're used to hearing. A lot of people go ‘oh I don't want to listen to that because it's experimental.’” The unfamiliarity of the sounds pushes people away when in actuality, these unfamiliar sounds are the essence of experimental music. Experimentalists compose their songs with the intention that it will compel their audience to deeply contemplate the meaning of what they had just listened to. The foreign sounds and noises are what induce such a diverse listening experience in this genre. They are the heart and soul of experimental music, meant to attract inquiring listeners, not push them away for being distinctive in nature.

When learning any language, it takes a considerable amount of time and practice to become fluent and understanding the language of innovation spoken by experimental music follows that principle. Jeffers explains that in the new language of experimental, “everything is weird and you don’t know what a sound means or what comes next ... it’s very in the moment.” You wouldn’t become a fluent Chinese speaker after just one lesson, so similarly, listening to a single experimental song wouldn’t suddenly make you an expert on the genre. But as Jeffers points out, experimental is all in the moment. There’s no sure-fire way of becoming fully knowledgeable of this language. Every individual song is able to teach the listener a new lesson and angle in this complex language. For Boljonis, he specifies that his favorite experiences with this language have always been to “stumble on something that is new and that [he’s] never heard before, that [he’s] never experienced before, and [he] walk out going, ‘that was way cool.’” Both Jeffers and Boljonis are able to speak experimental music’s language, they have been listening and immersing themselves in it’s language for years, yet they each have their distinctive understanding of it. Jeffers’ work revolves around exploring new music, she has a professional level understanding of the language. On the other hand, Boljonis can speak the language from the perspective of someone creative, he has a personal connection to what it means to innovate. They both, along with everyone else who is able to speak experimental music, have their own memories and associations that make understanding the language that much more personal to them. “That for me is the greatest,” Boljonis says. “To listen to things constantly that are different every day. And I think experimental music is the fun stuff that really pushes it, and pushes people in different directions.”

The next time you find yourself stuck in the middle of Bay Area traffic at the end of a long day, consider tuning in to one of the local experimental radio stations and start your journey towards fluency. Put in the time to look around at the countless office buildings and know that on the inside, bright minds have been working tirelessly to create something new. Recognize the innovations they make every day. Take the innovation that you already know and live among to allow yourself to be fully immersed in the realm of experimental and learn its extraordinary language that continues to evolve into something new. After all, as *The Conversation* states, “Music has a role in reflecting contemporary life, our interests and concerns. Experimentation is required to keep this reflection accurate and relevant, and challenging the idea of what is “musical” is an important part of this. We have to push music in unexpected directions” (Hope).

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