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A Gateway to Modern Music

“AaBbCcDcEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOoPpQqRrSsTtUuVvWwXxYyZz,” Indecipherable.

Experimental music composers like John Cage and Frank Zappa have spent their lives creating the indecipherable, the confusing, the most outlandish sounds: only to be comparable to the text above, given that it says nothing. Experimental is nothing and everything altogether, brought by those willing to push the boundaries of what it means to make music. And experimental music is just that, an experiment. Something as simple as scratching CDs and playing them aloud are classified as such, and these bizarre sounds, found purposely or accidentally, find their way into the world, giving light to the fascinating ways in which music can be explored. Sonic Youth, for instance, must not have begun their experimental career believing they would jump start the world of rock and New Wave. But experimental builds the foundations of music and creation regarding a genre so that, “AaBbCcDcEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOoPpQqRrSsTtUuVvWwXxYyZz,” can mean “AaBbCcDcEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOoPpQqRrSsTtUuVvWwXxYyZz”.

Experimental music as a concept and in and of itself as a genre is very broad. There is no sound that can define it, like that of the fast-paced speaking in rap. Rather, it is the idea of innovation and the unknown in which its composers introduce to the world through “experiments”. In an article by The Fader, a pop culture review medium, Adam Harper describes experimental as to speak a new language, meaning that experimental is to explore a foreign idea

or concept and develop it in a way to be used, ideally formally in music, or in a sequence of sounds to further its understanding. By delving into new sounds, experimental paves the way to innovation in music. Had records not been experimented with to create the scratchy sound, turntables would not have spurred the genre of hip-hop in the way that it has through its development.

As a genre and as an idea, experimental gives creators the freedom to create as they see fit and think beyond just notes within the music. Not only are the sounds being played aloud important to the music, but also the composer/musician who is creating it. According to the British music journalist and radio presenter Tom Service, “We need to hear the friction of the bow hair on the string, the microsounds of their fingers on the fingerboard, the special resonance of the wood of that particular instrument, even the breathing of the player themselves. Take all of those “noises” away, and you would take away the music’s vital, human communication”. Music is not just about an appealing sound for the listener’s enjoyment; music is an indication of passion within creation. It is the thought which is cast into the music through its composition, creation, and technique in playing. The human aspect of the music, emotions and passion lent by composition, gives an energy and power which otherwise would not exist. It’s the idea of the human touch interacting with both the composer and listener. Experimental pays special attention to this aspect of music and embraces it to be so. Abra Jeffers, the experimental director at KZSU, urges that “...there’s very little difference [between music and sound], except you are purposefully making these sounds. It has a rhyme or reason to yourself even if there’s no rhyme or reason to the person listening.” In other words, the music may serve no purpose, but by adding human interaction to stir and manipulate the sound, it then breathes life and reason. In that way,

music is truly created. And, that's where experimental proves itself unique to other genres and styles of music. With its ability to draw attention to the composition and creative freedom it grants, the art form provides its writers and listeners the opportunity to pay close attention to this creativity and experience more than sound from it.

From its start, experimental music was not very popular (though not much has changed) and not because of its unconventional characteristics but the majority of people were unwilling to listen. In *From Experimental Music to Musical Experiment*, the well known musician Frank X. Mauceri reasons that "The performer, the orchestra, the concert hall, and even the music critic were (and are still) threatened by the appearance of new techniques" (190). With the idea that experimental is about evolving music from the standpoint of sound and composition, it was always true that its presence would not be widely accepted. But as Harold Rosenberg, a well renowned art critic, once proclaimed, "The new cannot become a tradition without giving rise to unique contradictions, myths, [and] absurdities" (9). Through time, experimental music became more prevalent, mostly due to the rise in technology. Seeing as it is more of a freeform class of music, college radio stations began to run it and open mics such as BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) in Brooklyn, NY allowed it to be played in live performance. It became something new and interesting to delve into. Something those curious tend towards out of sheer interest. Steven Boljonis, a local photographer and listener of experimental music, emphatically states that his "...favorite thing is to stumble on something that is new and that [he's] never heard before, that [he's] never experienced before, and walk out going, "that was way cool." The appreciation of experimental has spread itself to those willing to listen and expand on the world of music, possibly with the outcome (much like Steven Boljonis) that it is actually quite intriguing and

excitable. More so at this point in time, the art form has been stereotypically deemed as strange and weird, a far step from its reign of “disgrace” for being against the norm.

Experimental music is a gateway to riveting works and interesting sounds that otherwise wouldn't have come to be without “outside of the box” creating. The genre itself is an experiment, often yielding interesting results, both appealing to listen to and otherwise. Yasunao Tone's *Solo For Wounded* CD for example had sounds that were “created by covering a copy of his 1992 CD *Musica Iconologos* in Scotch tape and forcing a CD player to play it by pinpricking the tape to circumvent the machine's error-detecting system” (*The Wire Primers* 35). While one may imagine the sounds emanated by such a CD are most likely choppy, without rhythm, and unsequenced, the concept of allowing the music to be in the hands of a machine is nothing if not intriguing. All of this is not to say experimental is all about letting the sounds happen. The process of creation can of course be very hands-on, much like that of any song. The actual music being played on instruments and the like— an obvious statement— gives it this association, but a method often used to be both impartial and active in the process is sampling. Steven Boljonis paralleled the use of sampling and experimental with a track made by Brian Eno and David Byrne where “they [Brian Eno and David Byrne] recorded an exorcist, a real exorcist. And they used that with sampling music over it, and it's the most— it's really spooky and really amazing... It was probably 20 years old at least, but it's just, you know, they take these samples of things that shouldn't be in music. An exorcist should never be in music” (Boljonis). Through a very simplistic method of creating music, experimental still finds ways to bring about interesting and eccentric sounds through the common use of sampling. The genre all in all gives way to a more diverse method of creating, resulting in a more diverse set of sounds. It both interjects itself into

modern music with the idea of innovating and makes captivating music one can surely appreciate.

Experimental is an outlet to innovate and integrate. It is the start of something new that doesn't necessarily have to be widely accepted, because something like turntables weren't so popular until they became an instrument greatly utilized and sought after in hip hop music. This gives hope to other sounds and creations, like static that often comes up in experimental songs. Years from now, the thing most associated with a dead station on the radio could potentially integrate itself into music or perhaps create an entirely new genre with an eager audience.

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