

The Political Economy of Table Music

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On May 1, 2011, I had the honor of participating in a musical performance at the St. Elisabethkirche in Berlin led by the Swedish-French artist-musician duo Annika Larsson and Augustin Maurs. Titled *El Cant des Ocells* (“the song of the birds”) and conceived as a “concerto for cello, gong ensemble, orations and table ceremony,” the song’s subtitle already hinted at Larsson and Maurs’ interest in the traditional notion of *Tafelmusik* or *musique de table* – a musical (as well as theatrical) practice more fully explored in their project for the Adelaide Festival of Arts. Indeed, the piece of furniture referred to in the aforementioned subtitle was probably the concerto’s most dramatic physical feature: a long table, slashing the nave of the Schinkel-designed church in two neat, diagonal halves, around which some hundred people had gathered to drink, eat, and listen to music and speeches (“orations”) delivered by assorted members of the audience (who would stand up and speak only after having been given a “talking stick” in the shape of a pink flamingo that was passed around the table for most of the evening). Needless to say, much of the performance’s success – and successful, I believe, it was generally found to have been – derived from the confusion that result from the blurring of this particular boundary: where, around this particular table, did the border line between audience and participant and/or performer run exactly? If the audience was seated around a table that was mentioned in the piece’s title as an integral part of its instrumentation, was it thereby not automatically drawn into the role of actually performing it?

And here is another memory of that memorable evening I have been clinging to ever since: the clinking and tinkling of cutlery hitting the dishes, kept to a nearly inaudible minimum by an anxious audience in awe of Maurs’ masterful cello-playing and our muted stroking and banging of the gongs. Nearly inaudible, but audible enough to mingle rather emphatically with the evening’s musical ambience – can there ever be *Tafelmusik* without the sound of a bottle of wine emptying itself in a glass, without the soft mumble of someone asking his neighbor at the table for the salt and pepper, if you please?

In naming their new piece, conceived for the Adelaide Festival of Arts, a *divertimento*, Larsson and Maurs return to the tradition of *musique de table* as one specific form of what has been called *Gebrauchsmusik* (“use” or “utility music”): played at banquets or cocktail parties, at exhibition openings or gala nights, i.e. *never played for its own sake* – in that it never requires an attentively, i.e. intently listening audience to sit down “for” it – it performs the highly ambiguous role of “diverting.” But – and here we relive the confusion talked about earlier – diverting from what, and towards what else? If not really meant to be listened to, was the *Tafelmusik* composed, most famously, by Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) meant to draw attention to the mundane pleasures of eating, drinking, chatting? And how does one do *that*? If I want to concentrate my thoughts on eating, drinking, chatting, the odd flirtation even, it is likely that even the soothingest of background sounds will eventually end up sounding as a source of distraction (“diversion”) rather than a lubricant – and if these selfsame background sounds go so far as to actively *refuse* the label of capital-M music as something that requires listening *to* rather than merely overhearing, they will possibly even end up as a source of irritation: *noise*.

Here is what Jacques Attali has to say in his seminal *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* after noting, by way of inauguration, that the world is not for the beholding but rather for hearing instead: “more than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies. With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men. Clamor, Melody, Dissonance, Harmony; when it is fashioned by man with specific tools, when it invades man’s time, when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream – Music.” From Noise did Music arise, and to Noise it shall return: ashes to ashes and dust to dust – a process that much “sound art” has sought to actively accelerate. The liberation, so passionately fought over for most of

the twentieth century, of sound from the tyranny of music is entirely in tune (no pun intended!) with a politics of culture that, for much of the same time, has striven for the subversion of the established order of things. The confusion caused by the clinking of glasses and clanking of cutlery during what is thought to be a musical performance – and therefore appears to demand the sterilized aural environment of absolute, pure silence to be able to deliver what Theodor Adorno famously called its “promise of reconciliation” – is not very different from the much more profound confusion caused by the spectacle of this process of subverting and the disorder it has created. Disarray, born from a certain type of *diversion* – an especially deep and elemental one to be sure, but a divertimento nonetheless.