People are encouraged to work harder and to be more relaxed at jobs which, by nature, may not be exciting or motivating.... The music should be barely noticeable and non-distracting: a soft fog, or music you can 'breathe.' It is not the music itself that increases production, but rather, the relief from the monotony of the work that music provides.

The sound of *Ave Maria*

We are at Eaton's. A few days before Christmas. This is the men's clothing department. Two loudspeakers are placed close to the cash register.

> At this point someone asks the artist what is she doing. Her comment is, 'recording the music.'

The music invokes the image and atmosphere of a cathedral and thereby the memory of religious celebration. It creates a holy atmosphere around the cash register, transforming it into an altar. It is as if one is involved in a holy act while paying for the goodies.

An instrumental version of *Blackbird*

Recently Muzak announced plans to enter the 'foreground' music market. It would market a service based directly on record company releases and would not re-record these as the Muzak background service does.

This could very well mean that the background music service of Muzak has lost its competitive edge, since the recent appearance of 'foreground' music producers on the market. Perhaps also Muzak, in the traditional sense, is simply not heard any more. Here is an advertisement for 'foreground' music:

> You know about background music. Lots of strings. Forgettable melodies. Music that just lies there. Foreground music isn't like that at all. It is meant to be heard, with just enough presence to be an active, enjoyable part of people's dining, service or shopping experience.

I had a dream about a 'fast-music-place' sort of a MacDonald's for music. It is a place for tourists. There were instruments that were made available. Everyone was trying to make music together but nobody had much time so, nobody bothered to tune their instruments, nobody listened.

The sound of applause.

Listening and Soundmaking: A Study of Music-as-Environment

Hildegard Westerkamp

It is my claim that the music we encounter in the public sphere of the urban soundscape (music-as-environment), constitutes a dominant voice, throwing the relationship between listening and soundmaking off balance. Not only does this music have the power to silence us but it can also change our relationship to listening, that is, it can make us passively accept what we hear. Music-as-environment has become an inescapable presence in the public sphere of our lives. Via the loudspeaker, it is transmitted into shops, malls, restaurants, lobbies and banks, onto sidewalks and over telephones. It has become an environmental sound in the urban landscape. It is acoustically interwoven and perceived simultaneously with other sounds in the environment. This music-as-environment is a widely accepted, often desired sound which is at the same time ignored.

Music can be defined as environmental when it accompanies the activities of daily life. In other words, when the activity is the focal point and not the music. This definition applies to any music that has been put into the environment with or without our choosing and

with the specific purpose of forming an acoustic backdrop to another activity. There is an inherent contradiction in music-as-environment: the more of it there is, the less it is listened to; the more its presence suggests a musical status quo in the soundscape, the less we tend to use our *own* voices to make our own music. It has the power to reduce us to passive listeners and discourage us from soundmaking. It can, in fact, rob us of our desire to listen and make sounds.

Music-as-environment channels a basic cultural need in us for active participation in music and soundmaking into the activity of commodity exchange. Music-as-environment sets the tone for many people's favourite pastime: consuming. It puts us 'in the mood' and may give us the illusion of partaking in a cultural event. Music-as-environment has been placed squarely into the realm of commerce. It is the voice of money and as such is given authority and accepted as a dominant voice – one that has the power to replace our own voices. It has become a necessary presence for many people and, ironically, perhaps the only one that provides some kind of atmosphere in our urban existence:

> Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security. And today, wherever there is music there is money.[1]

Music-as-environment, itself a commodity, determines the tone of commodity exchange. It is a fetishized object that conceals, through its very 'tone,' its relationship to money and power, its function as mediator of human relations and its functions as 'mood-setter.' Without it, or so its producers would like us to think, we may not be able to interact; may not feel safe.

Music-as-environment engulfs us acoustically, shuts out the problems of the outside world and creates the illusion that the consumer environment is 'where the action is.' It has established itself as a cultural system, a 'place' in the world, the 'womb' of twentieth century urban living. But it is a false womb. It does not provide basic physical and spiritual nourishment to us as it can only exist inside the world of money. Poor people will not find nourishment there. When we examine the historical development of music-as-environment it becomes obvious that its 'voice' has become louder and more present in the urban soundscape. It started out as quiet background music that was barely noticeable. However, the new style of leased music that has recently emerged is more aggressive, usually louder and is called 'foreground music.' This latter style is original music, not re-recorded or re-orchestrated as background music is, but performed by the original artists.

Muzak by Muzak was the first company that played a major part in introducing background music into the environment and as Jacques Attali says, 'one of the most characteristic firms dealing in the music of silencing.'[2] Its appearance as an antidote to lo-fi soundscapes and stressful work situations laid the basis for the widespread acceptance of music-as-environment. Its very specific philosophy and the specific intent behind its 'psychological design' have largely been responsible for its success. Music-as-environment laid the foundations for the domination of one sense of time over all other senses of time.

Muzak originates in the United States, which calls itself a democracy. Yet Muzak and its manner of transmission have all the qualities attributed to totalitarian regimes: tonalism; primacy of melody; distrust of new languages, codes or instruments; a refusal of the abnormal.

A detailed examination of these qualities may be in order here, since the quality of the musical sound itself can expose to the candid listener the ideological belief system that is at the roots of its design.

How does Muzak's quiet sound manage to be a dominating voice? The traditional Muzak sound is 'engineered' music. Familiar tunes, varying styles of music and musics from other cultures are absorbed, melted and blended into a uniform sound of background music. This sound is mostly instrumental and rarely contains solo voice or lyrics. It is the sound of a string orchestra, quietly undulating in and out of song and in and out of silence. It never provokes the listener's ears.

If in its overall sound, Muzak is a melting pot of varying styles of music; it is, within each individual tune, a melting pot of two opposite sounds: the sound of the dominant culture (the orchestra) and the sound of popular culture (the tune / melody and sometimes the beat). The orchestra gives timbral, textural and structural shape to the melodic line of the popular tune. On the micro-level, this is an example of the containment of popular culture within dominant culture. The orchestra is the dominant voice, the sound that sets the tone of the selected pieces that are to be re-orchestrated under this system.

Another kind of containment is achieved in the way the Muzak is presented in most environments. The loudspeakers are positioned evenly over the whole space of a mall, restaurant or supermarket, to ensure that the customer never gets away from the influence of the Muzak. This is as much a part of the intentional design as the Muzak itself. In addition, Muzak comes from above, as the speakers are usually installed in the ceiling. As a result Muzak tends to have a celestial, angelic sound (as of a thousand strings). It is not just the instrumentation that causes this but also the acoustic properties of the loudspeakers themselves. The frequency range that they transmit is fairly narrow, with emphasis on the middle and high frequencies and poor response in the low. This brings out the high string sounds in particular.

Every so often one hears a familiar tune. When this happens the listener's perception shifts, yet never quite into the foreground, because even the familiar tune does not jump out at the listener. It is safely embedded in the same format of orchestration: it is not the original setting of the tune. It is like seeing a friend from a distance, feeling a bit of joy about this distant vision but never actually meeting. It will liven one's perception (stimulate) for a short time and possibly give a glimpse of pleasant emotions but then it will pass. In other words, the music not only undulates in and out of the ambience, it also creates undulations of emotions in us that we are only vaguely aware of and that we can hardly prevent from happening. Familiar tunes remind us of certain times in our lives and of emotions associated with those times. Even if the tunes are not directly known to us, they often resemble a mood and an atmosphere that is familiar. They conjure up a mood and they impose that mood onto the environment. And Muzak itself is well aware of this effect:

> Functional music is designed to have a definite effect on people in a store, plant or warehouse. It effects their moods and attitudes and makes them feel better.[3]

To speak of Muzak is not just to speak of a specific musical sound but also of an ideology that is deeply rooted in North American culture:

> Muzak is the logical product of the melting pot ideology which seems to find its highest cultural expression in Disneyland, *The Lassie Show* and *Lawrence Welk*. True, it brings together music from several countries

(primarily Western European or those heavily influenced by Western European culture) ... but this music is, to use Muzak's own words, absorbed, melted and blended into a bland, characterless, colourless concoction.... No matter what country the music comes from, it ends up, when Muzak is finished with it, sounding Americanized.

Muzak penetrates every one of us a little bit, no matter what socio-cultural background we come from. It does this by absorbing, melting and blending various styles of music from different cultures into the uniform sound of background music. By doing this, it in fact 'melts' the musical and cultural vitality out of them. It establishes itself, with the help of the tools from so-called high culture, as the dominant musical sound that can contain all musical sounds, even if they were once oppositional. The essence of the melting pot ideology lies in the dissolving of cultural vitality – the silencing of voices – of which Muzak is the most sinister expression.

Muzak's success lies in the fact that it has been in existence for years with little protest. People have accepted it as an acoustic backdrop to their lives, their work and their leisure activities. It has masked noise and has managed to mask problems that underlie a stressful work station. It has created environments of human silence, where people neither listen or make sound.

Foreground Music

Moody's 1981 industrial manual states that 'Muzak announced plans to enter the foreground music market.' Up until that point Muzak was a background music producer and as such was successful in creating the distracted listener. The new style of leased music, called foreground music, is more aggressive in its presentation. It consists of original hits by the original artists and the musical license is purchased from ASCAP, BMI, CAPAC, PROCAN, etc. When one hears foreground music in a public place it is usually played at a higher volume than Muzak. It has an uninterrupted, more driving flow. It is a sound that wants to be heard and listened to. It is a sound that wants to be present and to participate in the listeners' lives. Often this music is heard in smaller contexts such as trendy dentist offices, stylish clothing stores or restaurants – in places that have popular appeal to a younger clientele. The music is not only designed

to suit the 'moods of the day' but also to suit various styles and tastes of the 1980s:

> musical selections are based on demographic appeal to specific age groups and eras, and by tempo.

The fact that foreground music is so successful probably means that the background music service of Muzak may have lost its competitive edge. Perhaps Muzak, in the traditional sense, is simply not heard anymore. It is interesting to note that, with the emergence of foreground music, Muzak has given its traditional background music a new name: Environmental Music by Muzak. With this naming the Muzak Corporation is officially stating that its background music is, indeed, an ambient, environmental sound which is ignored like all other urban environmental sounds. By contrast, here is some advertising for 'foreground music' from EMS in Seattle:

> Foreground Music. The Competitive Edge. It's not just background music anymore.

AEI (Audio Environments Inc.) advertises in a similar vein:

> You know about background music. Lots of strings. Forgettable melodies. Music that just lies there. Foreground music isn't like that at all. It's meant to be heard. Meant to make your customers excited to be in your establishment. With just enough presence to be an active, enjoyable part of their dining, service or shopping experience.

Where background music wants to create a hidden relationship to money, foreground music is explicit about its overt connection to money-making. The cover of the AEI foreground music pamphlet, states, 'we can teach you how to make money playing music.' And on the back cover can be read:

> Teach your cash register to sing with foreground music from AEI. It's the most beautiful music of all. The ringing of increased sales. And it's part of the music you'll be hearing when you install an AEI foreground music system. So call our sales representative today. And learn how to make money by getting into music.

Foreground music tends to consist of an uninterrupted flow of sound: silence is avoided. The intention behind this is similar to that of background music: do not startle the listener into a more alert listening stance. With foreground music, silence would be a mistake

because it would interrupt the established flow and thereby the established perceptual stance. In the background music context, the listener is kept in a passive listening stance because the music moves quietly in and out of silence. In the foreground music context, the listener is kept in a continuous state of stimulation because the fast pace never changes. The end result is not that different. Because there is no change and no surprise in the overall flow of sound, the ears lose their alertness and become passive receptors of an even louder and more aggressive musical sound.

However, even though we are hearing original music, the overall musical sound of foreground music has a certain uniformity. The fact of the matter is that a lot of 'original' music is created to fit into this uniform format:

> It is not that song has become more debased; rather the presence of debased songs in our environment has increased.[4]

Even though foreground music producers supply a variety of musical styles, the overall acoustic impression one gets from hearing music-as-environment is one of sameness. The music functions merely as an accompaniment and its listeners' distraction gives the impression of uniformity.

Foreground music differs from popular music in that it excludes certain types of popular musical production. More specifically, it excludes music that has an oppositional voice, a voice that comes out of subcultural groups, such as Blues, Reggae, New Wave, a voice that shouts out its suffering and that has something specific to say. Such music has its own unique voice which takes a critical stance towards society and questions or disturbs the status quo. Foreground music companies exclude this kind of music because it would startle or alert both those that would be alienated by it and those this music speaks to. Popular music, in its original sense, implies that the music comes out of a community with oppositional social relations to the dominant culture. If such music is eventually integrated into the foreground music market, it is because its oppositional quality has lost its edge. However, it does retain memories of an oppositional time that was meaningful for those who participated in its production. Hearing traces of those memories can give us a sense of connection and the feeling that we share something significant with the business or consumer context that plays the music. The music sets the tone and, as with Muzak, the emotions

and desires that it evokes get channeled into commodity exchange. This whole dynamic is much more in the foreground here than it was in the case of Muzak. The connection between music and money is an accepted one. It is indeed abnormal these days for a store not to have a musical voice, since the music is meant to reassure us that this is where we belong: this is 'our place' for consuming.

The various styles of foreground music have the same effect as Muzak: it takes us away from who we are at present. It takes us into an artificially created space, enclosed and isolated from the outside world; a space that speaks of another time. It is not our own voice we hear.

Notes

1. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 3.

2. Ibid., p. 111.

3. William C. Rogers Jr., Regional Manager for Muzak Corp., quoted in *Hardlines Wholesaling*, April 1978, p. 39.

4. Jacques Attali, p. 109.

VEC AUDIO EXCHANGE

Rod Summers

Way back in the late seventies, before knowledge of universal corruption became universal knowledge, there was a survivor from the sixties who, for unexplainable reasons and despite a career in the Royal Air Force, had managed to retain a few of his original brain cells in a more or less pristine condition.

This survivor had an idea which was going to change the world population's concept about how one c / should approach art without making musicians jealous that would challenge the very superiority of vision at the same time! You, being the intellectual type, will realize that we are talking renaissance format monumentality here.

In 1978 this same artist had just returned from a triumphant audio performance at the Student Union of Warsaw University's Social and Cultural Cellar. After pausing, only to remove his RayBurns and polish his brass tooth with *Goldodo*, he dashed off a quick letter to some artists / friends who had sent him audio tapes. In the letter he asked his friends for permission to allow him to collage the material they had sent him and to publish it on cassette. These friends were Paul Carter (England), Leonhard Frank Duch (Brazil), John M. Bennett (USA) and Anna Banana / Bill Gaglione (Canada / USA).

Having faith in their friend, all agreed. A noisy C60 was born, it was christened HERE, and the VEC AUDIO EXCHANGE was launched. It took less than six weeks from concept to posting of the first copies of HERE. The VEC AUDIO EXCHANGE project did not stop until a total of 16 different one-hour programs had been made.

The idea of making the cassettes *available by exchange only* was an integral part of the initial concept. The idea of *exchange* is a ground rule of mail art. My idea, to produce audio collages on cassette available in exchange for other audio works, obeyed this rule to the letter.