

Linda Kouvaras, *Loading The Silence: Australian Sound Art in the Post-Digital Age*

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Reviewed by Ellis Jones

Linda Kouvaras's *Loading The Silence* functions as both an entrance to Australian sound-art for those with no great knowledge of the field, and as a work of cultural musicology, which identifies the importance of various, often contradictory, strains of postmodernism within this body of work, theorising a close link between sound-art and the *altermodern*—that is, the *post-postmodern*. It also acts as a fine introduction to the key concepts and approaches behind sound-art in general.

The first three chapters narrate a brief history of sound-art, beginning with a broad international overview, and narrowing down to focus on the key figures in the emerging Australian scene in the early 1970s, pivoting on the importance of Percy Grainger (with his conception of 'free music') as a kind of spiritual founding father. Kouvaras illustrates a tension between the abstract formalism of modernists such as Boulez, and the proto-postmodern messiness of experimentalism (such as the work of 'mavericks' Henry Cowell, Morton Feldman, and Harry Partch), and traces this conflict into the dawning of sound-art. The former ideology is taken on in the form of the 'reduced listening' encouraged by Pierre Schaeffer, taking everyday sounds and divorcing them from their origin in order to focus on them as sound. The latter is embodied by the 'heightened listening' encouraged by John Cage, reducing the distance between the sound and its real life source, and therefore between composer and audience, as Kouvaras notes, 'leading *out* from the sound into its surrounds, where the receivers of the sound are deeply implicated' (p. 27). The book's title refers to the importance of Cage's 4'33" as a kind of ground zero for sound artists (whether Australian or not), following which the primary concern of sound art is to 'load' this silence; accepting an open invitation to fill the void.

It is made clear that sound-art is positioned antagonistically with regards to modernist art music, but sadly the relationship between sound art and popular music is not mapped out in any detail. This is surprising, as surely pop is the music which, more than any strain of art music, has done the most to promote the importance of timbre and 'feel' over harmonic complexity. Brian Eno is introduced as a theorist, without reference to his formative years in Roxy Music; there is only a fleeting mention, later on, of the role that punk rock played in the evolution of 'noise' music; and no reference is made at all to the importance of pop music in developing the culture of 'DIY' to which sound-art is greatly indebted.

The core of the book (chapters 4 to 8) offers case studies of around sixty works of Australian Sound Art, organised loosely by theme ('The Geographico-political,' 'The Quotidian and beyond'), and by a flexible (but helpful) chronology. Kouvaras states that the criterion for inclusion in the book is partly personal (whether the work 'speaks' to the author), and partly an attempt to 'reflect the primary terrain of sound-art practice' (p. 16), and the selection certainly seems broad enough to my non-specialist eye. The chapter on 'Feminizing the Sound Object' is particularly strong, featuring works such as Frances Dyson's 1993 work *Window Pain*, which utilises the disembodied and 'unreal' nature of recorded sound in order to offer a disparaging commentary on traditional medical responses to female illness. However, some later sections lack this level of analytical detail, resorting to flavourless descriptions of the processes of the piece in question rather than offering an insight into their meaning or effect. This is especially disappointing with regard to those pieces which cannot be experienced second-hand, either due to their unavailability on record or their nature (as, for example, installations and sound sculptures), although it is a credit to the clarity of the descriptive writing that I was left intrigued enough to *want* to hear them. At times the prose seems scarcely concerned with avoiding tedium, such as in the insipid introductory statement: 'Shoes are very prosaic objects. Here are two examples of sound art that make shoes central to their concerns' (p. 157).

Kouvaras depicts Australian sound art as something of an insular scene (with perhaps a few hundred active composers), stating that the majority of critics are also practitioners. The large proportion of collaborative works featured would support this notion of a tightly-knit community, which historically has been based around institutions such as the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre. With that in mind, it would have been interesting to have a little more information on the social environment that produced these works, as there is clearly a world of mischief lurking behind titles such as *50 Synthesizer Greats* and *Dr Burt's Disco-fat Arkestra Plays Their Greatest Hits*. And perhaps it's just me, but I think it is always useful to know where the money is coming from—which works were funded, which sold well (or were commercially available), which artists have made a career from music and which are holding down day jobs.

A recurring theme within the featured case studies is the tension between chance and control, and the extent to which the composer is willing to grant his or her work the freedom to take shape during performance. Broadly, this is a dichotomy with roots in the modernist-experimentalist division highlighted early in the book, but it is notable that many composers seem to consider performative freedom in some way linked to idealised freedom as a vaguely political gesture, rather than as a compositional tool. Deciding not to use an instrument of power (that is, giving performers direct, specific instruction) can still be a display of authority, and in any case often the element of improvisation permitted is highly restrictive, creating a

sound-world very much controlled by the composer. Allowing someone the artistic freedom to 'make it their own' feels rather like a token gesture when you have equipped them with only a children's 'Whirly' toy and instructed them to 'interweave' their 'sound threads' (as is the case with Sarah Hopkins's 1982 piece *Whirliworks*).

I was occasionally frustrated by the unblinking acceptance of the composers' explanations of their own works, particularly the pseudo-science and ecological posturing offered by a few of the featured sound-artists. Cynical perhaps (or merely prejudiced), but I felt that talk of 'chakras' and the 'collective unconscious,' and Peter Hamel's notion of music offering a route to 'ancient knowledge [...] eroded by Western rationality' (p. 73), could have done with more stringent analysis. And it is disappointing that the 'demonstrable scientific fact' that 'scientific fields such as chemistry, atomic physics, [and] crystallography' rely on 'a framework of whole-number ratios such as those perceptible in notes' (p. 74) is used by Kouvaras to support implicitly this notion that music offers a route to some primal or deeper being through its unchanging mathematical power, rather than its cultural power. A large number of pieces claim to represent the 'environment' (natural rather than urban), and even to 'let nature sing for herself,' but there is little exploration of the power relations at work here, and of the cultural capital to be gained in making such a claim.

The final chapters deal with the key premise of the book, and highlight the importance of the 'altermodern' as a means of theorising about contemporary Australian sound-art. Kouvaras notes that much present-day sound-art still retains the modernist-postmodernist tension, with the former represented by 'neo-modernist' sound-artists such as Merzbow. However, this neo-modernism is 'inflected with postmodern elements' (p. 200), reclaiming elements of mass culture, or perverse uses of technology (such as Warren Burt using modern computing power to create a cut-up piece designed to sound like an unedited piano performance). The altermodern allows for 'direct re-engagement with the history of earlier modernisms' (p. 221), rather than high modernism's anti-nostalgic outlook, emphasising sound-art's ability to comment on the present whilst reflecting the past.