

# Mr Bloom's electric opera

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Josh Epstein

SUBLIME NOISE

Musical culture and the Modernist writer  
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This is a gloriously noisy book, in the sense that in reading it one experiences something of the unordered voices, dense textures, dissonant tones and jarring cross-rhythms of the culture it explores. By opening up the complex polyphony of noise in the early twentieth century, Josh Epstein reveals how music and literature were not only shaped by this soundscape but also part of it. In a “study of resonance and not of influence”, he opens up the work of five Modernist writers (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Edith Sitwell, E. M. Forster) in terms of how their engagement with Modernist music (Luigi Russolo, Igor Stravinsky, George Antheil, William Walton, Benjamin Britten) informed the use of noise in their own work.

There has been a lot of interest in noise recently – historians have started *listening* to history rather than just looking at it. Modernity is particularly ripe for reconsideration in terms of its aural impact on the human sensorium, and noise has become a key term for discussion in not just musical aesthetics but also politics and other areas of study. But its resistance to definition, as a kind of catch-all term that evokes something multifarious and uncontrolled, makes it both attractive and, potentially, too broad to be useful. As Epstein points out, “noise is rarely defined except by negation” since noise, “by definition, never belongs wherever it is (otherwise it would not be ‘noise’)”. In this book, one moment noise is the clanking and grating acoustic stuff produced by the technologies of modernity; the next it is a metaphor for disjunctions of literary register, tone, social class, shrill publicity or competing social and cultural discourses.

Epstein's account opens with the everyday understanding of modern noise as the acoustic detritus of industrial machinery and urban life, embraced enthusiastically by the composer Luigi Russolo. His manifesto *The Art of Noises* (1913), the musical equivalent of Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, was a call for music to engage with the sonic possibilities opened up by the machine age, as demonstrated by his own noise-making machines (*intonarumori*). Despite the few concerts in which these featured (provoking the audience uproar obligatory for the avant-garde) it is fair to say that Russolo's legacy is based on an idea rather than musical works as such. More important for the literary figures discussed here was the American composer and self-styled “bad boy” of new music, George Antheil, best remembered today for his *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), originally scored for sixteen mechanical pianos and an array of percussion that included a siren and three different aeroplane propellers. Antheil worked closely with Ezra Pound on the latter's opera (*Le Testament de Villon*) and was approached by James Joyce (without success) to work with him on a four-hour “electric opera” based on the twelfth episode of *Ulysses*, to be called “Mr Bloom and the Cyclops”.

Central to Epstein's account of noise in Modernist literature is what he calls the “Antheil dilemma”, the tension between an idea of music as formal and autonomous, separated from the messy realities of everyday life, and that music as an inextricable part of

material social practices, spectacle and debate. It was certainly not a dilemma confined to Antheil, but rather points to a constituent tension of Western art music which explodes in the early twentieth century. Epstein's title derives from a phrase used, in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, to describe Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The calculated opposition of Forster's phrase (surely Beethoven is sublime music?) sets up an interference pattern between two ideas, blurring the boundaries between the idea of pure musical tone and the noise of everyday life, the one ordered and self-contained, the other heterogeneous, messy and uncontrolled.

One aspect of this that literature could borrow from music was rhythm. Just as music internalized aspects of the rhythms of an industrial society, so too could literature. Epstein underlines how Eliot heard Stravinsky's “primitivist” ballet *The Rite of Spring* as an urban soundscape, and thus as an example of the counterpoint of hyper-modernity and nostalgia for the intuitive and instinctive that runs through much of Modernism, from Picasso to Antheil, Stravinsky to Pound. Of course, Epstein is concerned with one very particular form of Modernism here. His interest is with “the artwork coming to grips with the failure of its autonomy from social life” – thus with Satie's *Parade* not Webern's instrumental music, with the breaking down of the boundaries of tone and noise in Russolo, Antheil and Varèse, not the cultivation of hermetic “purity” in aesthetic abstraction (in works such as those by Mondrian and Boulez).

But the main substance of the book has to do not with music but with reading literary works through the idea of music and noise. Epstein's discussion presumes a fairly expert knowledge of the texts he discusses, leaping from one work to another, often on the basis of a resonant allusion. There may not be very many readers who will follow all of this, though perhaps these virtuosic readings may inspire some of us to become familiar with texts we didn't know before. The guiding thread throughout is the tension between the ordering principles of art and the unruly noise that is its material, what Epstein refers to, in his discussion of Joyce and Pound, as “the futile effort to corral noise into aesthetic unity”. His vibrant readings have some of the noisy eclecticism of the texts themselves, overflowing with detail and undisciplined by any theoretical dogma. The result is often rich and provocative, though at other times curiously monotone, since the constantly high-decibel performance can make all three authors sound remarkably similar.

By contrast, the turn to Edith Sitwell's and William Walton's *Façade* (in Chapter Four) and to E. M. Forster's and Benjamin Britten's

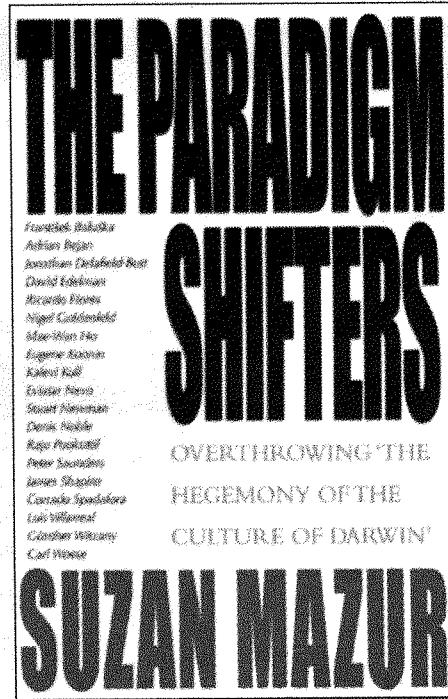
collaboration on *Billy Budd* (in Chapter Five) shifts the focus of the book somewhat, in part because these were more genuinely collaborative projects but also because of the nature of the music. *Façade* may seem a long way from the major works of literary Modernism discussed earlier, but Epstein argues for it as a “self-consciously cosmopolitan work . . . imbricated with cultural politics”, a work that has to do with questions of social and political identity and which hinges on eclectic borrowings from contemporary music and musical theatre (including Erik Satie's *Parade*, Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and the productions of the Ballets Russes).

Epstein offers some fascinating analysis of the British musical scene to contextualize Walton, aligning him with the Sitwells and Edward Dent as part of a musical cosmopolitanism and against the cultivation of a national style represented by Vaughan Williams, Stanford and Elgar. This closer focus on music is carried through into the final chapter, which examines questions of personal, social, sexual and national identity, as written out in Forster's *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, and Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*. Epstein's reading of Britten, both insightful and thought-provoking, is the most musically specific of the book (including

some musical examples) which brings to the fore a defining tension of the relation between music and literature – the polyvalency of musical meaning, its always slippery, dynamic and “disruptive relation to the noisy political melomap”.

Forster's word is “muddle” – the tendency of music towards multiple and often contradictory meanings, arising out of quite different ways of listening (as explored in *Howards End* long before Adorno's notorious typology of listeners). For Forster, this muddle of musical meaning made it useless as an agent of social change, though in “the age of mechanical reproduction”, especially radio broadcast (an important term for Epstein), that turned out not to be the case, albeit most obviously so in the context of repressive regimes. It is surprising that the politics of controlling noise receives relatively little attention here. Pound's embrace of the machine, and of Antheil's mechanical music, which he hoped would “aestheticise the soundscape, energize music, and demechanise the machine worker”, comes uncomfortably close to the role that an aesthetics of the machine played in the Fascism of the 1930s and 40s.

Epstein commands an impressively wide field of reference and his writing is always lively, richly textured and colourful – sometimes brilliantly so – though I often found myself longing for a simpler formulation and a single, sharp, clear idea. Taken as a whole, however, *Sublime Noise* is a thought-provoking study, densely packed with intelligent connections and highly resonant.



**Major scientists from a dozen countries present evidence that a paradigm shift is underway or has already taken place, replacing neo-Darwinism (the standard model of evolution based on natural selection following the accumulation of random genetic mutations) with a vastly richer evolutionary synthesis than previously thought possible.**

Suzan Mazur is the author of two previous books, *The Altenberg 16: An Exposé of the Evolution Industry* and *The Origin of Life Circus: A How To Make Life Extravaganza*. Her reports have appeared in the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *Forbes*, *Newsday*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Archaeology*, *Astrobiology*, *Huffington Post* and other publications, as well as on PBS, CBC and MBC. She has been a guest on *Charlie Rose*, *McLaughlin* and various Fox Television News programs.

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