

Noise music – an avant-garde fusion of art and life?

What is the avant-garde? This question is not easy to answer since the use of “avant-garde” involves a heterogeneity of definitions: In the Nordic countries the notion of “avant-garde” was not used until the sixties, while the Anglo-American notion of “modernism” was introduced at an early stage of the 20th century; in Germany “Die Moderne” was used until the notion of “avant-garde” was imported in the sixties in an attempt to explain the most radical art practices; in the Anglo-American language “modernism” was favoured;¹ and in the romance speaking countries national varieties of the word “avant-garde” occurred. Not even today do we mean the same thing when speaking of avant-garde in different countries, a circumstance that is further complicated by the fact that speaking about avant-garde in music means encountering yet another usage.

Instead of trying to narrow down the definition of “avant-garde”, I will explain my own use of the notion. Firstly, I do not mean the specific usage in musicology but the general aesthetic practice. Secondly, in my use of “avant-garde” I will follow the strict German use, i.e. focusing on the aesthetic movements of the 20th (and 21th) century that are operative both politically – in a broad sense, as we shall see – and aesthetically. By this I mean the most radical art movements in the early 20th century, which the German researcher Peter Bürger subsumed under the name “the historical avant-garde”; the upheavals in the fifties and sixties led by what he called the neo-avant-garde; and the aesthetic experiments of today that very likely constitute a new wave of avant-garde activities. The avant-gardes react to modernity as well as other contemporary movements, such as modernisms and postmodernisms, and in comparison with these two movements the avant-garde artists focus on the performative and processual qualities of art (i.e. the creative act), while modernisms focuses on the work of art *per se*. The avant-gardes try to fuse art and life in a rejection of the ivory towers of *l’art-pour-l’art* and modernisms. This also means that I regard the avant-gardes, modernisms and postmodernisms as parallel movements in modernity and late modernity, responding to each other as well as reacting against each other.

What has all this to do with the music of Bjørn Hatterud? Not very much initially, but I will try to elaborate on my use of the notion of “avant-garde” in relation to noise music to make my argument clearer (with the reservation that all we can do when analysing aesthetic practices of today is to describe them as carefully as we can, while leaving the final conclusion to the generations to come). I am not a musicologist and therefore I do have difficulties in describing the musical qualities of noise music, and will therefore try to relate to this phenomenon in a

¹ I disregard Clement Greenberg’s confusing use of the notion here, since he is most likely speaking of modernism. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, *Art and Culture. Critical Essays*, Boston, 1961 [1939], pp. 3–21.

broader sense. Noise music is a genre with very strong connections to the avant-garde tradition *in toto*, since the first attempts to produce noise music was most probably developed for the Dada soirées and the futurist shows in the early 20th century. From this practice there is a continuous line throughout the century from Dada and futurism to the experiments after the war as a reaction to the evolution of the recording media – with the invention of portable players and recorders in the fifties. Not surprisingly, the avant-gardes are often the first to use new media and to explore these media together with their developers. A very interesting example of such an alliance is the cooperation between engineers and avant-garde artists at the museum of Modern Art in Stockholm in the sixties, where they developed the “Carlsson” loud-speakers that could meet the demands of the performances staged there. So, it is reasonable to conclude that today’s digital revolution has instigated a corresponding aesthetic (r)evolution as well, which is one reason for regarding noise music as avant-garde.

This conclusion would have been naïve, though, if it had not been for the fact that there are other circumstances that call for the notion of “avant-garde”. First of all, there is a crucial difference between the miscellaneous avant-garde movements in the 20th and 21th centuries, since the historical avant-gardes reacted to modernity and the neo-avant-gardes to late modernity (or, postmodernity as some will have it), while the contemporary avant-gardes necessarily react to the art and society of today (whatever we call the *épistémè* of the early 21th century). This means that, while the avant-gardes of the first half of the 20th century sought to destroy the elevated position of the artist, the avant-gardes after the war aspired to destroy the grandeur of the work of art, in both cases in an attempt to fuse art and life. And today, when the name of the artist thrives in museums and in galleries (as well as guarantees the investments of the bourgeoisie), and when the works of avant-garde art are placed in the most highlighted positions in the same venues, there must be other ways to respond politically to the conditions nowadays in order to fuse art and life. Using new technological means is of course one way of doing this, but, as I stated before, there are other criteria for an avant-garde. The recuperation of the artistic name that Marcel Duchamp introduced by signing a porcelain urinal “R. Mutt” (a pun that in German means “poverty”), and the annihilation of the “work of art” that the post-war generation of avant-garde artists staged (by developing, for example, happenings, performance and land art) was meant to fuse life and art. When this fusion has failed (the name of the artist is still the main criterion of success) as well as succeeded (the principal question after the sixties is: “What is art?” or in its everyday wording: “Is this really art?”) the avant-garde artist must proceed to meet the demands of today in his or her fusion of life and art.

Secondly, the Danish musicologist Torben Sangild distinguishes between three musical gestures, or levels of noise: expressionist, introvert and minimal noise. “Noise adds specific meanings to the gesture in which it partakes – disorder, chaos, blurriness and fuzziness – ultimately a decentring of subjectivity”.² The noise music of Bjørn Hatterud should, according to Sangild’s distinctions, be labelled “extreme, minimal noise”, since it does build on the tradition from Luigi Russolo’s manifesto “The Art of Noises” (1913), via the electronic neo-avant-gardes of the fifties and sixties such as Gottlieb Michael Koenig’s *Klangfiguren II* (1955–56) and Gordon Mumma’s *The Dresden Interleaf 13 February 1945* (1965), and also the turn of rock’n’roll to noise prefigured by Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music* (1975). This line in music was made possible by the French composer Pierre Schaeffer, who with his experiments with record players and recorders, described in the milestone *À la recherche d’une musique concrète* (1952), laid the foundation for technological experiments in music after the war. John Cage, Steve Reich and Terry Riley are other influential names in this avant-garde tradition; three composers that should be regarded as the main inspiration for Bjørn Hatterud’s noise music. All this decisively places his music in an avant-garde tradition that dates back at least a century, but at the same time it is important to see what is new in this box set, since a relation to a musical tradition does not necessarily make an artist avant-garde.

Thirdly, there are tendencies in the arts today, which are resolutely political and at the same time aesthetic, movements that take their inspiration from new theoreticians such as the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud and the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. The first person to front the idea that the avant-garde artists use of collage and montage were their main means to create art was Peter Bürger. Today this tendency is even stronger, since – in a tradition of the historical avant-gardes – poets like Kenneth Goldsmith in New York, Martin Glaz Serup in Denmark and Paal Bjelke Andersen in Norway all use the refuse of everyday life and language in a political way. They lay bare life in our society in all its poverty when they expose the language of soap operas, politics and newspapers, perceived in new and estranged ways, thus allowing us to see these things anew. Similarly, Bjørn Hatterud, in a purely avant-garde act, reuses recorded noise from the street, from machines and from people and lifts these sounds out of their context while estranging these sounds in a protest against life in society today with his textual references to everyday life, thoughts, habits and (empty) pornography. Hatterud does not only get his material from everyday life, but also goes beyond it when he takes his inspiration from garbage, “low cultures” and other extremes in our society, at the same time as he degrades the intellectual

² Torben Sangild, “Noise – Three Musical Gestures – Expressionist, Introvert and Minimal Noise”, *The Journal of Music and Meaning*, vol. 2, 2004. See also Torben Sangild, “The Aesthetics of Noise”, <www.ubu.com> (read 260213).

trends in art and academia with a *detournement* – as in the carnevalistic title of the second record: “Social constructivism gives me a hard on”. In this way, his noise music takes its form in the collision between popular culture and high art; the vulgar and philosophy; Nordic dance music (*dansband*) and the New Wave of the eighties; autoeroticism and homo erotic love exhibited live at cam4.com and *Frieze Magazine*.

In the words Bourriaud used to explain art practices in the 1990s, Hatterud thereby confirms the relational aesthetics of the arts, where the relations between humans become aesthetic objects in their own right – exactly in the same way as these relations are objectified and commercialized in contemporary society. The sounds of Hatterud are taken out of their contexts, and treated as *objet trouvées* in his “postproductive” aesthetics (using another notion from Bourriaud), where everything is and can be regarded as feasible objects to create art from. It is here that I see his connection to the international avant-garde movements, which reveal the routines and trivialities of everyday life. Such an avant-garde strategy has its political roots in the Situationism of Guy Debord, who in *La Société du spectacle* (1967) describes modern life as an experience of living in a continuous set of spectacles. The avant-garde artists are therefore, in the words of Jacques Rancière, their other main source of inspiration, exposing “la partage du sensible” in which the power and “les régimes de l’art” partake in a move to regain the right to define and distribute the “sensible” themselves. It is when the aesthetics of Bjørn Hatterud is compared to this more or less conceptual tradition with its goal to redeem the political force of aesthetics that he might be regarded as avant-garde.

And finally, after my elaboration on the notion of “avant-garde” and elucidation of the impossibility for me to name a contemporary aesthetic movement as avant-garde, I want to rephrase my introductory question in the title of this essay for future generations to answer: Could the noise music of Bjørn Hatterud be best described as the cum of music masturbating, or is his aesthetics – connected as it is to Bourriaud’s ideas about a relational aesthetics and to Rancière’s ideas about the politics of aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible – an avant-garde fusion of art and life?

Per Bäckström