

Abstract concrete: Francisco López and the ontology of sound

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5 October 1948, Paris

In August of 1944, Pierre Schaeffer, announcer for Radiodiffusion Française, celebrated the liberation of Paris by playing a recording of “La Marseillaise” to an ecstatic France.¹ Four years later, Schaeffer heralded the liberation of music. Under the title “A Concert of Noises,” Schaeffer broadcast a set of “Études” he had composed entirely from recordings of train whistles, spinning tops, pots and pans, canal boats, percussion instruments, and a lone piano. In contrast with traditional *musique abstraite*, which passed through the detours of notation, instrumentation, and performance, Schaeffer called his new music *musique concrète*—music built from the sounds of the world and assembled directly by the hands of the composer via the manipulation of phonograph discs or the splicing of magnetic tape. Schaeffer gleefully abandoned the space of the concert hall, celebrating the fact that radio and recording made possible a new experience of sound. He termed the experience (following Edmund Husserl’s procedure of “phenomenological reduction,” which aimed at isolating the pure datum of experience) “reduced listening” or (following the Pythagoreans, whose initiates, the “akousmatikoi,” listened to the master from behind a veil) “acousmatic listening.”

Schaeffer’s profound influence on late 20th-century music led in two directions. On the one hand, along with John Cage, his experiments fostered musical post-modernism. His *concrète* procedures would later be developed and perfected by hip-hop DJs from Grandmaster Flash to Q-Bert and sampling artists from John Oswald to David Shea. “Acousmatic listening” would soon become the norm, as telephones, Muzak, Walkmen, and car stereos filled the sonic spaces of everyday life with disembodied sound. On the other hand, Schaeffer himself saw another set of possibilities in the “acousmatic” world of *musique concrète*: the affirmation of a metaphysical impulse characteristic of Romanticism and High Modernism. By recording sounds, altering them (slowing them down, speeding them up, reversing them, chopping off their attack or decay), and playing them back over radio or phonograph, Schaeffer hoped to isolate a world of pure sound cast adrift from the sources of its production and independent from the domain of the visual. What began

in the quotidian and the commonplace was, by a set of mechanical procedures and instruments, cast into another ontological realm.²

8 July 2000, Queens, New York

“I have a completely passionate and transcendental conception of music,” remarks the Spanish sound artist Francisco López after his DJ set at P.S. 1. “Of course, I have lots of ideas about the world and politics and whatever, but I think these things shouldn’t contaminate, shouldn’t pollute the music. I’m very purist.”³

Manipulating two turntables, a Powerbook, and a mixer, López has just subjected a blindfolded audience to deafening blocks of granulated noise composed, it turns out, of Death Metal recordings sliced, diced, and piled up ad infinitum. López is perfectly comfortable on a DJ platform; but his guiding aesthetic is hardly the postmodernist pastiche of the hip-hop turntablist. On the contrary, López is a resolute modernist who unabashedly deems his work “absolute music” and talks earnestly about summoning the “ineffable.”

Though he draws his material exclusively from field recordings and found sound, López is a musical abstractionist obsessed with sonic substance. He is critical of what he calls the “dissipative agents” of music, which is anything that distracts attention from the pure matter of sound: language, text, image, referentiality, musical form and structure, technique and process, instrumental virtuosity, etc. His compositions are dramatic and elegant, abounding with sonic subtlety and intricacy and exploring the extremes of aural perception. Often an hour in length, they unfold slowly; layering, juxtaposing, fading, and dissolving slabs of sound that rumble and rasp, buzz and hiss, grate and whirl. The recent *Untitled #89* (Or/Touch), for example, begins with minutes of silence and gradually builds into a maelstrom of metallic or insectile hums that pulse and swirl, albeit just within earshot.

Musical modernism is generally associated with academic composition, for which López has nothing but contempt and which he considers moribund and obsolete. But López is a key figure in a new modernism—a neo-modernist underground populated by an international network of DJs, experimental musicians, and sound artists

(among them Bernhard Günter, Masami Akita, Christian Fennesz, and Zbigniew Karkowski) working with the pure matter of sound and reanimating crucial moments in the history of audio experimentation.

4th Century, B.C.E., along the River Ilissus, outside of Athens

In Plato's *Phædrus*, the "sweet song of the cicadas' chorus" prompts Socrates to recall a musical and philosophical myth. The cicadas were once human beings, recounts Socrates. When the Muses first introduced song, these men and women were so overtaken with the joy of singing that they forgot to eat and drink and soon perished. As a gift, the Muses transformed them into cicadas, insects capable of singing continuously without nourishment. Upon their death, the cicadas were obliged to report to each of the Muses a list of those human beings that had honored them. To Calliope and Urania, oldest among the Muses, the cicadas reported those who had lived the rarest and noblest of human lives: the philosophical life, one dedicated to the apprehension of pure Being abstracted from its worldly instantiations and connections.⁴

Rainy season, 1995–1996, Costa Rica

Trained as an academic entomologist, López's conversion to his musical vision took place in the rain forests of Latin America. The notes to his 1997 recording, *La Selva* (V2_Archief) offer this account:

— La Selva, like many other tropical rain forests... is indeed quite a noisy place. The multitude of sounds from water (rain, water courses), together with the incredible sound web created by the intense calls of insects or frogs and plant sounds, make up a wonderfully powerful broadband sound environment of thrilling complexity. The resulting sound textures are extremely rich, with many sound layers that merge and reveal themselves by addition or subtraction, challenging perception and also the very concept of individual sounds.

López continues:

— There are many sounds in the forest but one rarely has the chance to see the sources of most of them. In addition to the fact that a multitude of animals are

hidden in the foliage, the foliage also hides itself, keeping away from our sight a myriad of plant sound sources... Many animals in La Selva live in this acousmatic world, in which the rule is not to see their conspecifics, predators or preys, but just to hear them. This acousmatic feature is best exemplified by one of the most characteristic and widespread sounds in La Selva: the strikingly loud and harsh song of the cicadas. During the day, this is probably the most typical sound that naturally stands in the foreground of the sonic field. One can perceive it with an astonishing intensity and proximity; many times you hear the cicada in front of your face. Yet, like a persistent paradox, you never see it.⁵

1964, Central Brazil/Paris

The paradoxes of *musique concrète* baffled the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, a contemporary of Schaeffer. In the course of justifying the traditional symphonic scheme through which he presented his analysis of Bororo mythology, Lévi-Strauss wrote:

— There is a striking parallel, between the ambitions of that variety of music which has been paradoxically dubbed concrete and those of what is more properly called abstract painting. By rejecting musical sounds and restricting itself exclusively to noises, *musique concrète* puts itself into a situation that is comparable, from the formal point of view, to that of painting of whatever kind: it is in immediate communion with the given phenomena of nature. And like abstract painting, its first concern is to disrupt the system of actual or potential meanings of which these phenomena are the elements. Before using the noises it has collected, *musique concrète* takes care to make them unrecognizable, so that the listener cannot yield to the natural tendency to relate them to sense images: the breaking of china, a train whistle, a fit of coughing, or the snapping of a tree branch.⁶

It is a parallel and paradox embraced by López and deployed in his polemics against John Cage and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer.⁷ Like Cage, López urges the dissolution of conventional distinctions between music and noise, composition and reception. Yet, for López, Cage too quickly abdicated the role of creative artist, substituting "chance" procedures that

continued Western art music's obsession with methodology and structure to the neglect of its true essence: sonic substance itself. Like Schafer, López calls our attention to the richness of the sonic environment and considers the world "the best sound generator there is." Yet, for López, Schafer, too, neglects sonic matter in his ecological focus on the relationship of sound to place, health, and communication. Acoustic Ecology and the Nature Sounds movement also foster what López considers a false or restricted conception of nature: nature as a bucolic refuge from human civilization. Acoustic Ecologists, in their Rousseauist fantasy, seem to forget that nature is also noisy and violent, the province of crashing waterfalls, howling hurricanes, and screeching monkeys.

"I like frog sounds as much as I like machine sounds," López replies. "And I use both in my work. The question is not: Do the sounds come from nature or come from machines? To me, the point is that the sounds by themselves have their own entity. From that point of view, it doesn't matter if you're working with frogs in the jungle or with machines in the city. If you're interested in the sounds, you can combine these two things and can also focus on the specific sound matter you're getting from those sources." Paraphrasing René Magritte, López warns his listeners "*La Selva* is not La Selva."⁸ To Cage and Schafer, López replies: "Let us Schaefferians have the freedom of a painter."⁹

Autumn 1964, Brooklyn, New York

López is deeply critical of Western culture's obsession with the visual. Yet he continually draws on metaphors from the visual arts, which clearly provide the model for his ideal of sonic abstraction. In conversation, he is likely to explain his *concrète* procedures by analogy with sculpture or photography. To focus the listener's attention on sound alone, he abandoned composition titles in 1997 and began releasing his work in clear slimline cases all but devoid of verbal and visual information. This strategy recalls that of abstract expressionist and minimalist painters and sculptors, who freed their arts from figural representation so that they could explore their real stuff: color and shape, space and mass.

Like López, Morton Feldman hoped that his music approximated the sublime stasis

of an abstract canvas. Though he worked closely with Cage, his mentor and friend, Feldman's aesthetic was more profoundly shaped by his association with the painters Phillip Guston, Willem DeKooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline. "[T]here was a deity in my life," Feldman told an interviewer, "and that was sound. Everything else was after the fact." Working at the height of serialism, Feldman confounded the systematizers with his delicate, drifting compositions, in which sounds came and went free of melody, rhythm, aim, or goal. The story goes that Karlheinz Stockhausen once chased Feldman around a conference, hounding him with the question, "Mort, what's your system?" Feldman is said to have replied simply, "I don't push the sounds around." Commenting on Stockhausen's colleague, Pierre Boulez, Feldman spat: "Boulez... is everything I don't want art to be. It is Boulez, more than any other composer today who has given system a new prestige—Boulez who once said in an essay that he is not interested in how a piece sounds, only in how it is made. No painter would talk that way."¹⁰

1936, Santa Fe, New Mexico

In a 1958 article written for *It Is*, a short-lived magazine dedicated to abstract art, Feldman repeated his condemnation of Boulez and instead celebrated the music of another Frenchman:

— Noise is a word of which the aural image is all too evasive... But it is noise that we really understand. It is only noise which we secretly want, because the greatest truth usually lies behind the greatest resistance... And those moments when one loses control, and sound like crystals forms its own planes, and with a thrust, there is no sound, no tone, no sentiment, nothing left but the significance of our first breath—such is the music of Varèse.¹¹

Two decades earlier, Edgard Varèse had turned away from tone, melody, and rhythm and toward a new conception of music that he called simply "the organization of sound." Speaking to an audience at the Santa Fe home of radical naturalist, Mary Austin, Varèse imagined a music of the future.

— When new instruments will allow me to write music as I conceive it, the movement of sound-masses, of shifting

planes, will be clearly perceived in my work, taking the place of the linear counterpoint. When these sound-masses collide, the phenomena of penetration or repulsion will seem to occur. Certain transmutations taking place on certain planes will seem to be projected onto other planes, moving at different speeds and at different angles. There will no longer be the old conception of melody or interplay of melodies. The entire work will be a melodic totality. The entire work will flow as a river flows.¹²

Feldman's and Varèse's visions offer fitting descriptions for much of López's output. Beginning and ending nearly imperceptibly, López's compositions mobilize fluid masses of noise that course, slide, and crash with a force at once serene and threatening in its awesome power.

11 March 1913, Milan

Outlining his program for an "art of noises," the Futurist painter Luigi Russolo wrote his friend, the composer Balilla Pratella:

— It cannot be objected that noise is only loud and disagreeable to the ear. It seems to me useless to enumerate all the subtle and delicate noises that produce pleasing sensations. To be convinced of the surprising variety of noises, one need only think of the rumbling of thunder, the whistling of the wind, the roaring of a waterfall, the gurgling of a brook, the rustling of leaves, the trotting of a horse into the distance, the rattling jolt of a cart on the road, and of the full, solemn, and white breath of a city at night. Think of all the noises made by wild and domestic animals, and of all those that a man can make, without either speaking or singing. Let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes. We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air or gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws, the starting of trams on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We will amuse ourselves by orchestrating together in our imagination the din of rolling shop shutters, the varied hubbub of train stations, iron works, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants, and subways.¹³

Back at P.S. 1, López is celebrating the pleasures of urban noise. "I have many sounds on my releases that are very similar to the sounds you can hear on the street," he notes. "But, people don't listen to those sounds very well. So recording is important because it leads people to listen."

20 October 2000, Amherst, Massachusetts

López's discourse abounds in paradoxes: a Romantic/modernist in the heart of DJ culture; an auteur who aims to bear witness to sound itself; a sonic abstractionist who insists on the priority of field recording; a metaphysician whose medium is the sensual. One would have thought that aesthetic postmodernism had discredited such Romantic and modernist claims to aesthetic purity and abstraction. Yet perhaps the choice is no longer one between modernism and postmodernism.

From Schaeffer onwards, DJ culture has been guided by two figures: the cut and the mix. To record is to cut, to separate the sonic signifier (the "sample") from any original or natural context or meaning so that it might be free to operate otherwise. To mix is to reinscribe, to place the floating sample into a new chain or machine of signification. The mix is the postmodern moment, in which the most disparate of sounds can be spliced together and made to flow. But the mix is made possible by the cut, that modernist moment in which sound is lifted and allowed to become something else. Before it is reinscribed, the sonic signifier can achieve, momentarily, a kind of pure potentiality, abstraction, and freedom. To sustain this moment is impossible, for meaning and signification are ever ready to capture and reinscribe the way-ward mark or sound. But the genius of Schaeffer—and of López—is to call our attention to the cut, that elusive moment in the constitution of recorded sound, and, for a minute or an hour, to break the flow.

Small portions of this essay appeared previously in The Wire (September 2000), pp. 32–33. Thanks to Molly Whalen and Dan Warner for contributions.

- 1 Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Is Paris Burning?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), pp. 256–57, cited in Lowell Cross, “Electronic Music, 1948–1953,” *Perspectives of New Music* (Fall/Winter 1968).
- 2 See Pierre Schaeffer, *La Musique Concrète* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), pp. 9–24, and *Traité des Objets Musicaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), p. 91 ff, p. 261 ff.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from López are drawn from my interview with him at P.S.1, Queens, New York, July 8, 2000.
- 4 Plato, *Phædrus*, 230c, 258e–259d.
- 5 Francisco López, liner notes to *La Selva: Sound Environments from a Neotropical Rain Forest* (V2_Archief, V228), pp. 11–12.
- 6 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 22–3.
- 7 See R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).
- 8 López, liner notes to *La Selva*, p. 8.
- 9 López, “Schizophonia vs. l’objet sonore: sound-scapes and artistic freedom,” *eContact!* 1.4, <http://cec.concordia.ca/econtact/Ecology/Lopez.htm>. For López’s critique of Cage, see “Cagean philosophy: a devious version of the classical procedural paradigm,” <http://www.franciscolopez.net/cage.html> and the interview with López in *Révue et Corrigée* (May 1999), available at <http://www.franciscolopez.net/int.html>.
- 10 Morton Feldman, “An Interview with Robert Ashley, August 1964,” *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, Expanded Edition, ed. Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs with Jim Fox (New York: Da Capo, 1998), p. 364. The Stockhausen anecdote appears in a number of places, among them Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After: Directions Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 303. Morton Feldman, “Predeterminate/Indeterminate,” in *Morton Feldman: Essays*, ed., Walter Zimmerman (Berlin: Beginner Press, 1985), p. 47.
- 11 Morton Feldman, “Sound—Noise—Varèse—Boulez,” *It/Is 2* (Autumn 1958), p. 46.
- 12 Edgard Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,” *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, p. 197.
- 13 Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), pp. 23–30.

A track by Francisco López can be found on Cabinet’s website at www.immaterial.net/cabinet.