

J.G. Thirlwell: Educating the ear

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Proceedings of the International Conference *Beyond the Centres: Musical Avant-Gardes Since 1950*
Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 July 2010, <http://btc.web.auth.gr/>

Abstract: By the end of the seventies the creative assimilation of the teachings of music pioneers like John Cage, Steve Reich and La Monte Young had assumed its most structured form with the appearance of noise composers such as Maurizio Bianchi and the heavy industrial ecstasy of Throbbing Gristle – music that stands among the most significant examples of academia informing the music of the young European and American subcultures of the time. These developments led to the birth of a multi-faceted popular music mosaic with particular cultural functions, which inspired Australian composer J.G. Thirlwell to embark on his idiosyncratic 30-year career. His exploration of a very broad range of music idioms (noise, classical, pop, jazz, soundtracks), the application of intertextuality both as to form and as to the content of his music compositions, the use of technologically advanced methods to encompass an experimental musical transcription, render J.G. Thirlwell the agent of an unexpected balance between popular, anti-commercial and academic forms. The unorthodox innovations of J.G. Thirlwell require a trained ear and familiarity with the particular norms comprising his *sui generis* musical approach. Nevertheless, he is creating landmark innovations and rejuvenating the sonic, and especially the artistic, dimensions of what we call culture. The aim of this paper is to examine the intertextual nature of J.G. Thirlwell's pioneering work, especially in his early stage recordings, and to describe his form/ content development, which constitute his contribution to modern experimental musical locus.

The emergence, in the context of post-modernism, of a very broad range of eccentric music creators, and their embracing or rejection of the revived subcultures of the late 1970s, coincided with the birth and development of punk music. Punk, as a force of change was an apotheosis/rejection of post-war popular culture¹. It constituted a happy landmark in liberating art from technical know-how and knowledge-based processes and re-formulating the lore of yore about the romantic artist and his idiosyncratic, introverted delivery: all you need is an old battered guitar to express it, a console to transform it into sound. In the context of artistic "hooliganism" there is the expected liberation from structure and content; however, it too ultimately ends-up acquiring a non-transparent structure². The cultural explosion –punk was more a cultural than a musical revolution- was soon transformed into a musical equation and an easy one to solve at that; all that was left was a condemnation of popular culture as being repetitive and shallow and lacking in sophisticated intellectual content.

Popular music in the late 1970s contrived to artfully conceal the complexity of an –allegedly– single-celled organism, as modern music was seen. Beyond punk's outburst, popular music was poised to pursue other directions, quite distant from thudding drums and throbbing bass guitars, and much closer to the minimalism of La Monte Young, Reich's tapes and Riley's drones, Varese's noise and Stockhausen's *Elektronische Musik*. In Great Britain Throbbing Gristle, a sonic post-extension of the art group Coum Transmissions, used home-made instruments to construct a terminology made up of concentration camp and erotic imagery, and eccentric use of technique; this was the first wave of industrial music. The group's central force, Genesis P-Orridge, experimented with tapes, white noise, and samples to produce a range of unclassifiable sounds³. In Italy, Maurizio Bianchi, as Sacher-Pelz / Leibstandarte SS⁴, used old records and a turntable to develop a popular strain of noise music that circulated all over Europe in the form of cassette tapes. In France, Eva-Johanna Reichstag subjected the French accordion to electronic distortion and used tough imagery⁵, introducing the trends that would inform the neo-industrial scene in the following decade. In Germany, die Toedliche Doris, a three-member art group with a special, humorous slant, re-recorded their concerts and then sung over the re-recordings, or assembled albums from sound-bits that

complemented each other to form future projects. In an extreme showcase of their methods, their music was recorded on plastic doll discs⁶.

In this context of ambiguous lines between high and popular culture, where artists may not be familiar with the standard musical "alphabet" (though this does not mean that they lack artistic and musical ability, in rhythm for example) and whose main quest is for innovation and experimentation and originality, we meet the Australian composer J.G.Thirlwell. From Melbourne, he came to embrace British punk and participated in the pioneering European noise group Come (later Whitehouse) before arriving in New York in the early 1980s. It was a time when art-punk and the cutting-edge virtuosity of DNA and Glenn Branca defined the music scene, exploiting their encyclopaedic knowledge to create "irrational" recordings⁷. Thirlwell's first discographical efforts⁸ under the aliases "You've got Foetus on your breath"/ "Scraping Foetus off the wheel"⁹ came out on his self-owned Self Immolation label and are marked by the *renaissance* aesthetic of diversity in art: they encompass production, orchestration and arrangement, cover art, and -most importantly- composition, which is unexpectedly "synthetic"¹⁰. Essentially, the music is a distillation of Thirlwell's motto: "The studio is my instrument". The studio is his only collaborator. No musicians appear on either the studio recordings or the live performances – only the sound engineer supervising the recording process.

Thirlwell flirts with collage¹¹ without cancelling the varied links with his musical texts; the *intertextuality*¹² of his compositions is notably idiosyncratic: his work has not been downgraded by seeking fanciful stamps of artistic approval, nor does it need to prove its worth through such agencies¹³. It does not seek historicity and does not resort to nostalgia, since Thirlwell operates on an inter-historicity, playing a game with times and eras, rejecting the "collective objective spirit" of his own time. By jarringly juxtaposing genres, form and content, Thirlwell challenges the average listener: he proposes a whole new reading of music, using a different cultural viewing-prism.

Thirlwell's ultimate intentions become apparent on his first LP, *Deaf* (Self Immolation, 1981), are still in a formative stage on *Ache* (Self Immolation, 1982), and *Hole* (Self Immolation, 1984), and have acquired a definite form by the time of *Nail* (Self Immolation, 1985) and *Thaw* (Self Immolation, 1988). Recently, some of Thirlwell's minimalist compositions, which are of special interest, have been re-issued¹⁴.

In all of J. G. Thirlwell's work, from 1981 to *Quilombo!* (1991), his first purely instrumental project under the name "Steroid Maximus", we see a conjunction of high and popular culture¹⁵, which is marked by *intertextuality*. The horizontal *intertextual* character appears on the level of form: either euphemistically, as in the title of the triple-LP "Foetus on the Beach" [cmpr. with Philip Glass's "Einstein On the Beach" (1976)], or on the level of content, by means of a textual inference or a blatant or discreet reference to persons and events: Harold McMillan, David Byrne, Joan Collins, the French Revolution, juxtaposed upon a background consisting of a bittersweet discussion of American super-consumerism, British stolidity, popular mass culture. The graphics used in the albums' cover art, using left-wing propaganda imagery, comprise the first level of reading the personal mythology and voluminous iconography of Foetus.

The compositional element is informed by a "classical" style¹⁶, giving form and meaning to stand-alone works - for example, the use of classical-music terms such as *ouverture* and *theme* to delineate the beginning, middle section and finale on *Nail* (1984)¹⁷. The terms are used formally but not consistently, since the *genre*, as a formal and cultural construction, dictates otherwise. J.G. Thirlwell attacks all types of music –classical and popular- on all fronts, or synthesizes them into a *Wagnerian*¹⁸ idea: thus the abnormal Mary Poppins sings together with Thirlwell the mature *grand-guignol* of "Wash It All Off", "Lust For Death" and "Satan's Place" are parodies¹⁹ of commercial music genres such as surf- rock, "Clothes Hoist" highlights the shallowness of psychobilly and vulgar sexuality, "Calamity Crush" is the glorious lost song

of the On-U Sound label²⁰, while in the case of *Nail* the entire album is a charming play on formal deconstruction (e.g. "Flashback" or "Today I Started Slogging Again", with their incisive elimination of musical instruments and the creator urging the "band" to stop, or, better, "shut up"). For this to happen the band must not exist, the artist must hide behind the transition from monophony to polyphony (e.g. the orchestration on *Ache*) and minimal use of natural musical instruments. By now, instruments are intended only as fodder to be milked for the partial or total distortion of their sound in order to compose noise ("OKFM") before they disappear, only to reappear in more solid form in Thirlwell's early albums under the name "Steroid Maximus". Thirlwell doesn't seem to appear undecided regarding the use of noise and he supplements it with melodic elements; but the melody soon succumbs to absolute noise²¹.

Meanwhile, J.G. Thirlwell uses and incorporates in his work techniques that were first introduced by minimalist composers: *phasing* is used extensively in his unissued material of the early 1980s: "Piano Piece", "Primordial Industry" and "Industrial-Go-Slow". Compositions²² such as "That We Forbid" and "You Have To Obey" bridge the void in the creative use of samples – a void dating back to S. Reich's "It's Gonna Rain" from 1965. The use of modified (in the Cagean sense: prepared piano, toy piano, handmade instruments) and "fantasy" instruments (e.g. on the odd "Sick Minutes"), combined with Thirlwell's technological innovations in composing and mixing- creating sample-based music before samples were established commercially and used extensively in genres such as hip-hop and before the massive introduction of MIDI protocol- redefine the formally restricted popular forms and build a bridge to a wider audience, who may have no prior knowledge of the new currents in music history, dating not from the 1950s, but as far back as the early 1920s- noise music, for instance.

It is clear that J.G. Thirlwell challenges the medium listener's taste: his corpus balances between sound influences of popular music genres, incorporated in the shape of high- brow music forms. Throughout the years and using *Quilombo!* as the starting point, J.G. Thirlwell's music has been more and more difficult to categorise and more perplexed to listen to, it is where Thirlwell goes back to his simple but synthetic forms and he cooperates with various players in order to carry out his vision of instrumental synthesis. Encoding and decoding, constructing and de- constructing, *bricolage* as a powerful tool of creating new meanings: these elements constitute the basic characteristics of our culture's construction. And it is J.G. Thirlwell's music to become the audible paradigm to represent our post-capitalist culture.

The two main "narrative themes" in music²³ -the first referring to the development of musical and technological mediums and the institution of rules, the second rejecting commercialised reproduction and repetition by using, or even discovering, new modes of expression and consumption- have by now readjusted to the era of post-capitalism. J.G. Thirlwell connects the two major viewpoints: his work makes no reference to mass-produced output with fleeting messages. At a time when the individual subject is eliminated and there are no constants or sure divisive lines between high and mass culture, in an era of post-modern logic, there is a risk that underlies artistic creation and threatens to transform it into a unit of a "new-something: the risk of imitating extinct mannerisms and producing collages²⁴ with the aim of obtaining the approving stamp of history. Balancing across these very fine lines, Thirlwell is a special case: he cannot join either of the two above camps, since he has disclaimed the description of mere performer –a term suggesting academic forms-, and he is not interested in the fleeting significance of fanciful pop songs; on the contrary, he integrates meanings that make-up the substance of modern music and restore the semiotics of the creator's identity, helping him recover his personal stamp - his "I" as an artist, in a world in which the constantly-changing image of the artist has become the norm.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Joseph Batsos and Alex Tsiknias for their encouragement and true support.

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- Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (N. York: Picador, 2007)

Endnotes

- 1 Jacques Attali, *Noise- The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009),105.
- 2 The form grew to monstrous dimensions and devoured the content. Henri Focillon, *The Life Of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 58. As Focillon notes, in their latest stage works of art "...proliferate with some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities...".
- 3 Throbbing Gristle - The Second Annual Report (Industrial Records, 1977).
- 4 Leibstandarte SS MB - The Triumph of the Will (Come Organisation, 1980).
- 5 Eva-Johanna Reichstag - Zoophilic Lolita/ Tanz (Bain Total, 1977) and their later albums as Die Form and D.F. Sadist School.
- 6 The Chöre & Soli LP (1983-84).
- 7 For example, "Lesson 1" (99 Records, 1981) or the Symphonies, which Branca produced in the period of 1983-1995. They were based on large guitar ensembles and can be compared with Rhys Chatham / Guitar Trio and other Chatham recordings [Guitar Ring (1982)].
- 8 The Foetus under Glass - OKFM / Spite Your Face (Self Immolation, 1981) and You've got Foetus on Your Breath - Wash It All Off / 333 (Self Immolation, 1981) 7"s.
- 9 Throughout the years, J. G. Thirlwell has used a vast number of aliases such as Foetus, Foetus in your bed, Foetus under Glass, Foetus Inc., Foetus Corruptus, Foetus Interruptus and many more.
- 10 A typical example is the composition "I'll Meet You In Poland Baby" [Male, (1992)]. The samples used, but also the cinematic structure of the piece, create a narrative of a non-visual universe that can only be perceived through hearing.
- 11 The elimination of creator and genre marks Thirlwell's 7" "What Is The Bane Of Your Life?" (1982, issued under the name "Phillip and his Foetus Vibrations"). The B-side track "Mother I've killed the cat" presents a sonic summary of the post-modern era, a palimpsest without a hint of parody, even when we discern the "mask", the second level of the

creator's true self. Beethoven's ninth symphony is interlaced with Chopin's "Marche funèbre", excerpts from pre-recorded theatrical plays and an incessant monologue intoned by Thirlwell, to end-up in a happy classic-style dissonance before the three themes stop playing over each other.

12 According to John Fiske, intertextuality refers to the interconnected meanings of various mass-media works and to those stemming from experiencing the mass media and culture. Knowledge of the intertextual elements –horizontal and vertical- is very important, since they guide the reader in drawing-out the various facets of a text and formulating meanings. In any case, studying the intertextual links in a text yields valuable information and directions in understanding a culture or subculture. Therefore, each text –whether a TV project, a piece of music or a film- encompasses a range of textual information, applied in its context and enabling its reading by reference to other texts. Essentially, the connection with the other texts is made with reference to a particular genre, character or content (thematic link), but can also yield new texts, sequels to the archetypes.

13 At least this happens in the case of popular products, whether films, books or soundtracks. See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 123.

14 Limb (Ectopic Ents CD, 2009) includes 13 Thirlwell compositions dating from 1980-1983; they introduce, but also confirm, his course during the next decades.

15 See Jacques Attali, *Noise - The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 105. Remember that the first to bridge the gap between popular and high music, the first to "break down the repetitive hierarchy", were the free-jazz artists of the 1960s, such as Archie Shepp.

16 After Wendy Carlos and her "Switched On Bach" (1968) proposal, popular music started borrowing extensively from classical methods. A typical example is John Cale: before joining the music group The Velvet Underground he had collaborated with La Monte Young in the Theatre of Eternal Music project. Karl Jenkins made *Adiemus* but was also a member of the progressive rock group Soft Machine. Mike Ratledge, also a Soft Machine alumnus, composed the music for the visualisation of feminist cinema scholar Laura Mulvey's books, such as *Riddles Of The Sphinx* (1977). Other rock bands such as Yes incorporate Handel in their work (Yes Songs, 1973). See also Peter Manning, *Electronic And Computer Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

17 Other exceptional isolated examples are "Asbestos", "Barbedwire Tumbleweed", "Fratricide Pastorale" (Thaw, 1988) and "Spit on the Griddle".

18 We use the term "Wagnerian" as a synonym of "pompous" and as being related to the meaning of the "leitmotiv", a reiterated musical theme linked to a person, object or meaning. See Thomas May, *Decoding Wagner - An Invitation To His World Of Music Drama* (New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2004), 59.

19 In this case too, parody starts from an affection for the genre and deep understanding of how it operates as to structure, form and content.

20 The English record label On-U Sound was founded in the early 1980s by producer Adrian Sherwood. Its signature sound was a weird blend of dance and Jamaican dub music, as evidenced on the "Pay It All Back" label-compilation series.

21 Noise appears in various guises in Thirlwell's compositions: noise rising to a climax as in "Negative Energy", noise alternating with melody as in "What have you been doing?", eschatological noise as in "Fin".

22 Among Thirlwell's minimalist compositions, a special mention must be made of "Sjogren's Syndrome", a clear intertextual reference to Philip Glass's "Two Pages (For Steve Reich)" (1969), which (in its turn) is a transcription of Reich's compositions. In "The Anxious Figure" Thirlwell creates a comprehensive musical work made entirely out of extraneous pre-recorded material.

23 Paul Hegarty, *Noise/ Music* (N.Y/ London: Continuum, 2009), 61.

24 Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism Or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism* (Duke: Duke University Press, 1992), 17-18.