becoming a sound artist: analytic and creative perspectives

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Abstract

Recently, in a Harvard graduate seminar with visiting composer-scholar George Lewis, the eminent professor asked me pointedly if I considered myself a "sound artist." Finding myself put on the spot in a room mostly populated with white male colleagues who were New Music composers, I paused and wondered whether I had the right to identify [...]

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Recently, in a Harvard graduate seminar with visiting composer-scholar George Lewis, the eminent professor asked me pointedly if I considered myself a "sound artist." Finding myself put on the spot in a room mostly populated with white male colleagues who were New Music composers, I paused and wondered whether I had the right to identify that way. Despite having exploded many conventions through my precarious membership in New York's improvised/creative music scene, and through my shift from identifying as a "mrudangam artist" to calling myself an "improviser," and even, begrudgingly, a "composer" — somehow "sound artist" seemed a bit far-fetched. As I sat in the seminar, buckling under the pressure of how my colleagues probably defined sound art, Prof. Lewis gently urged me to ask: *How would it change things if I did call myself a sound artist?* Rather than imposing the limitations of sound art as a genre, he was inviting me to reframe my existing aesthetic intentions, assumptions, and practices by focusing on *sound*.

Sound art and its offshoots have their own unspoken codes and politics of membership, which is partly what Prof. Lewis was trying to expose in that teaching moment. However, for now I'll leave aside these pragmatic obstacles — while remaining keenly aware that the question of *who gets to be a sound artist* is not too distant from the question of *who gets to be an artist*, and *what counts as art*. For my own analytic and creative curiosity, I would like to strip *sound art* down to its fundamentals: an offering of resonance or vibration, in the context of a community that might find something familiar, of aesthetic value, or socially cohesive, in the gestures and sonorities presented.



Rehearsing for "Meena's Dream" (2013) by playwright Anu Yadav – original score by Rajna and Anjna Swaminathan and Sam McCormally.

I have spent most of my musical life wondering how the sounds I produce intersect with specific vectors of social belonging. The sounds emanating from my primary instrument — the mrudangam, a South Indian drum — are situated within a complex lattice of social difference, resonating within and across communities as disparate as the predominantly privileged-caste

audiences of Chennai's elite Karnatik sabha-s and the cosmopolitan connoisseurs who show up to find a home in New York City's myriad intercultural and experimental music spaces. The sounds I produce are also inflected by the multivalent referentiality of my own socially situated body — as a queer, privileged-caste, Indian-American woman — simultaneously slicing through and answering to sonic environments organized around particular notions of rigor, virtuosity, and beauty.

For me, what began as a creative path rooted in the mimesis of an artistic lineage eventually settled in a versatile expressive voice, shaped by a decade of aesthetic (and ethical) nomadism. From my vantage point as a female percussionist in the South Asian diaspora, I have always been aware of the cracks in the veneer of tradition and other normative structures, and perhaps this fueled my musical vagrancy. Over time, my sound has accumulated the resonances of Karnatik music, 'jazz' drumming, bharatanatyam footwork, and Afro-Cuban rhythms, among others.



The author performing with Vijay Iyer, Graham Haynes, and Marcus Gilmore. The Stone, NYC. July 2013.

Certainly, this convergence of sonic layers is mediated by the rich specificity of interpersonal relationships and positionalities within larger networks. Power and positionality mediate the shape, audibility, and versatility of sounds as they become coupled with the implied (or actual) encounter of socially situated bodies. Yet, sounds somehow continue to exist in excess of the mechanisms and bodies that attempt to explain, produce, and contain them: idiom, tradition, space, culture, nation, race, gender, and sexuality. Therein lies their potency and mystery, and I intend to briefly explore the sensation of sonic excess in the hopes of honing a more sensitive analytic and creative perspective.

I am yet to become comfortable thinking in terms of sound, due to the longtime privileging of structure and technique in my musical upbringing. However, this is beginning to unravel as I am forced to *deal with* sound, particularly the sound of what Patrice Pavis and Jason Stanyek have called the "intercorporeal" aspect of intercultural performance. The predominantly improvised sounds that resonate through my mrudangam often emerge on the edge of my dynamic embodied consciousness, arranging themselves chaotically in real-time, interacting with others' emergent soundings and sensory yearnings. Some of it may be mediated by parallel perceptual and idiomatic forms, but achieving a core interactive flow involves a fundamental immersion in *sound*.

https://vimeo.com/251985082

Mat Maneri, feat. Rajna and Anjna Swaminathan

Tongues Series, curated by Amirtha Kidambi

ISSUE Project Room — June 18, 2016

For instance, take this impromptu piece presented by violist Mat Maneri, violinist Anjna Swaminathan (my sister), and me in 2016. It took place in the wonderfully resonant vaulted space of ISSUE Project Room, in front of an unsuspecting audience that had convened to hear the back-to-back juxtaposition of two improvisational "tongues" — a set of Maneri's rich microtonal experiments, followed by a Karnatik concert of voice, violin, and mrudangam. However, this impromptu ludic exchange of sonic offerings — particularly Maneri's incredible, chameleon-like ability to confound the sounds of Karnatik ornamentations with his own microtonal reflections — guided attention away from comparison and toward the sounds as they bounced eerily around the resonant architecture. Faced with the technically daunting Karnatik repertoire that Anjna and I were to play subsequently with vocalist Ashvin Bhogendra, the echoes of our interstitial collaboration allowed us to reorient ourselves and breathe a little easier.

From an analytic perspective, it is irresponsible to distill these sounds, to capture and conceptualize them as distinct from the bodies, histories, and discourses that participate in their co-creation and interpretation. Yet, riddled as they are with generations of power asymmetries and complex emotions, it is clear that these resonances have a secret life of their own. As musicians, we are not often given the opportunity to explore these clandestine, almost Baudelairean, correspondences, except perhaps when we discover them by accident. For instance, sonic ambiguities like those spun during the trio encounter play on sonic excess to spur new ways of listening and relating, with a direct ethical impact on the ensuing music.



Performing in Vijay Iyer's large ensemble project, "Open City," named after Teju Cole's award-winning novel. October 2013.

John Blacking's definition of all music as "humanly organized sound" is perhaps an early articulation of this idea, although the word 'organized' contains a bias toward formal structure and stability. To be sure, organizing principles always exist at the local level of socially situated perception and expression, which Nina Sun Eidsheim calls the 'figure of sound.' However, the kind of sound art I'm proposing revels in *excess*, or as Eidsheim puts it — "not only aurality, but also tactile, spatial, physical, material, and vibrational sensations [that] are at the core of all music" (5). We can even turn to how Jacques Attali poetically describes composition — as "a labor on sounds, without a grammar, without a directing thought, a pretext for festival, in search of thoughts," a practice wherein "rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies once the screens of the symbolic, usage and exchange are shattered," one that neither marks nor produces the body, but allows for "taking pleasure in it" (143). By focusing on the multi-sensory, pleasurable valences of sound, and on the ways in which sonic excess allows for new patterns of coexistence, we can outline a 'sound art' practice and analytic that aren't circumscribed by Western institutional definitions and technological/perceptual biases.

Thinking in this way about sound and vibration helps to eradicate the mind-body problem that continues to plague certain areas of music studies and music making. Sound forms an elusive common denominator that doesn't rely heavily on colonial taxonomies of form or hierarchical theories of art. It even accounts for the subversive or incommensurable resonances that tend to emerge at the unstable threshold between so-called 'producers' and 'receivers' of music. After all, sound is in the ear of the beholder, and social asymmetries are embedded in the way we hear and listen. Through the notion of vibration, we are further attuned to the visceral space in which it reverberates, and the ways in which its echoes live on in the bodies of those who experience it.



performing at the Banff International Workshop for Jazz and Creative Music. June 2013. Photo credit: Don Lee, Image courtesy of author

Finally, there is the other definition of *sound* in English, which indicates a level of trust and holism. Taking this path to becoming 'sound artist' focuses attention on the *artist*. I don't intend to focus on the 'chops' conventional to a field of aesthetic practice. Rather, I am interested in the more obscure meaning: a 'sound artist' as one that *ethically occupies space as an artist*.

How might this emerging sound art, as analytic and creative practice, work to interrogate the very ethics and politics of *art*, while succumbing to the contingency and volatile excess of sound? I don't claim to hold the answers, but if we are in any way *sounding out* against the grain of dominant modalities, then at some level we must attend seriously to sound: in its excess, as it overwhelms bodies and spaces, and as it stretches the realm of the known.

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Featured Image: "The great Rajna Swaminathan," from Teju Cole tweet, 5 October 2013.

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***Rajna Swaminathan** is an accomplished mrudangam (South Indian percussion) artist, a protégé of mrudangam legend Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman. She has performed with several renowned Indian classical musicians, most notably mentor and vocalist T.M. Krishna. Since 2011, she has been studying and collaborating with eminent musicians in New York's jazz and creative music scene, including Vijay Iyer, Steve Coleman, Miles Okazaki, and Amir ElSaffar. Since 2013, Swaminathan has led the ensemble RAJAS, which explores new textural and improvisational horizons at the nexus of multiple musical perspectives. Swaminathan is active as a composer-performer for dance and*

theatre works, most notably touring with the acclaimed company Ragamala Dance and collaborating with playwright/actress Anu Yadav. Swaminathan holds degrees in anthropology and French from the University of Maryland, College Park, and is currently pursuing a PhD in cross-disciplinary music studies at Harvard University.

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