Subject of the Drone

Robin Purves

Abstract Minimalism as a musical phenomenon has been marked by the interaction of the drone with permutational rhythm. This essay follows the drone-form from the inception of Minimalist musical practice in the work of La Monte Young, to contemporary developments in works incorporating the drone by major artists operating in the experimental wings of popular music. To clarify the relationship or non-relation between the Minimalist feature of the drone and musical meaning, three drone-related works by Joan La Barbara, Eleh and Keiji Haino are discussed with respect to their relative proximity to, or distance from, language and/or speech. Each piece of music is also considered in terms of the subject who listens, leading to some speculative thoughts on the uses made of the drone and its remarkable persistence and diversity.

Keywords Minimalism; drone; semiotics; La Monte Young; Joan La Barbara; Eleh; Keiji Haino; subject

The entry for 'drone' in the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World* defines it in the following way:

> one or more sustained notes of identical pitch that, usually, accompany a melodic line often performed in a higher register. The note(s) can be sounded continuously (a 'continual drone') or be repeated at short intervals (a 'rhythmic drone'). Drones act as a tonal reference point and background for the changing pitch of other strands in the music. (Tagg 2003: 532)

The drone in these uninterrupted or rhythmically variable formats, and with these functions, has been a staple in musical performance across the world for a long time: in the Indian raga, the Scottish bagpipes, in polyphonic choral works, and so on. In late 1950s New York, however, drones started being produced by composers and musicians without melodic adornment as works in their own right and not as the tonic spine of a more elaborate composition.

The composer, La Monte Young, is known to be a pioneer in this regard with his *Trio for Strings* (1958) and a work written two years later as part of a series: *Composition 1960 #7 (July)*. The score of the latter in its entirety is the perfect fifth B F# interval, notated on a staff, plus the words 'to be held for a long time.' The duration of a performance of this score is entirely dependent upon the endurance of the performer or performers; there is no need to stop playing just because the audience has left the building or because they refuse to do so: the verbal instruction to maintain the appropriate position in the sounding of a player's instrument for what feels like a prolonged or interminable period can also be interpreted as a poetic addendum to the musical notation, concerning the potential relation to the work of a subject present to hear it. As the performers perpetuate the sound, 'being held' *by* it, depending on the taste of the individual listener, could involve feeling involuntarily detained by the drone or embraced and supported by it; it could involve transitions between those states in either direction. This essay discusses the experience of listening to three drones or, more accurately, three drone-based or drone-related

works whose existence would be impossible to imagine without the precedent set by Young as the progenitor of Minimalism's extended tones: Joan La Barbara's *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation*; *Floating Frequencies: Intuitive Synthesis III - Phase Two:* "Bass Pulse In Open Air" by Eleh; and Keiji Haino's "Wisdom That Will Bless I, Who Live In The Spiral Joy Born At The Utter End Of A Black Prayer." And in discussing these works, the following questions will be considered: What do these works *mean*? *Do* these works mean? If they *can* mean, in what ways do they *bear* their meanings? What are they for if they *don't* mean?

How could one begin to speak about a drone? The semiotician's approach to musical analysis, which thinks of music as a kind of discourse, if it ever reflected upon the drone, would consider it as a limit-case which defeats semiotic analysis. Raymond Monelle's *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* declares that "[a] single note has no meaning" (Monelle 1992: 20). If we assume with Monelle, for the sake of argument, that there is such a thing as a 'single note,' we can comprehend his insistence that this particle must be impervious to analysis and division but capable of combining in series with other single notes which *will* yield meanings:

> If a single note (the 'museme', a note in all its parameters of pitch, value, dynamics and so on) is the atomic unit of music, then the smallest meaningful unit or 'unit of music-logical form', the musical morpheme, must consist of at least three notes because two are needed to generate logical relations, and two terms – two sets of relations – are necessary for any proposition. (76)

This formula for generating the most minute but meaningful musical entity is confirmed at the receiving end: "the relations that lead to analysis only begin when two or more notes are combined; the minimal analytical unit comprises at least two notes, usually more" (89). Likewise, Kofi Agawu's *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* argues that one sound has to stop happening and another begin (and so on, in arranged sequence) for a 'musical discourse' to be established:

> Just as linguists distinguish levels of analysis, taking the sentence as the unit for linguistic analysis, and a succession of sentences as the domain for discourse analysis, so we can think about music in terms of a succession of "sentences," themselves accretions of those smaller meaningful utterances we called events. Musical discourse, in this sense, embraces the larger hierarchical level that encompasses these sentences. (Agawu 2000: 7)

Agawu's terms here might appear to indicate that the 'single note' could constitute one of "those smaller meaningful utterances we [call] events" but his own list of what qualifies as an event runs to "an idea, a motive, a progression, or more neutrally, a building block, phrase, segment, or unit" none of which exist in isolation but "are generally assumed to unfold in orderly fashion" (7). However 'meaningful' the event might be in isolation, therefore, it is only ever "a set of events which succeed and relate to each other" which are capable of "making a meaningful impression on the listener" (7). The assumption in both arguments is that each single note in a sequence will sound momentarily, from a plucked or bowed string or a depressed key, but what if the single note is extended and the sounding of the extended single note is the entirety of the work? The drone could not be considered the musical analogue of a sentence or even a word. The semiotician waiting for a relation or two to be generated in the shift to another and then

another note (which never come) would have to accept that, for the drone, there is nothing to say and nothing to be said. If the drone in its purest form can be considered one sound extending itself without meaningful alteration, without a progression to something else, then it seems that the drone cannot function as a musical sign. What would this mean for the drone? It doesn't mean that a drone can't be *granted* a meaning, but it may just mean that a drone can't *create* or *possess* a meaning without a composer/listener applying concepts and connections to it, provoked by what is heard, certainly, but also via paratextual information, in the design of record sleeves, the wording of titles, the personal history of a fan's connection to the music. Drones, after all, have routinely been identified with ritual, acts of worship, trance-states, the use of hallucinogenic drugs, the stirring of martial or nationalist sentiments, and austere avant garde aesthetics. The role of the subject as donor of meaning to the drone is a topic I will return to later in the essay, though only with respect to the act of listening, and with guidance drawn from the titles of the tracks but not their wider contexts and other kinds of paratext.

Joan La Barbara's collaborations with and influence upon composers such as Cage, Feldman, Reich and Glass would be enough to award her a crucial place in the history of experimental music and of Minimalism in particular, but I intend to discuss the score and performance of her own first composition, *Voice Piece: One Note Internal Resonance Investigation*. La Barbara has spoken of the importance of exercises conducted with jazz musicians in the early 1970s, where she tried to imitate their instruments as they played "long tones on single pitches," for renewing the ways she used her voice and the ways she thought about the role of voice in performance (La Barbara 2002: 36). *Voice Piece: One Note Internal Resonance Investigation* was premiered at St. Mark's Church, New York, in December 1974 and its character attests to the formative influence of the training she had undertaken with the jazz players. A performance of the score appears as the second track on her first album, *Voice Is the Original Instrument,* a recording La Barbara has described as "a statement of purpose and a manifesto" involving the invention of various means to "rediscover the basic function of the voice as the first means of expression as well as to release untapped sonic material" (La Barbara 2003: n.p.).

Voice Piece accomplishes this task by directing performers to generate one note of their own choosing, which La Barbara's score specifies should be "clear, clean and specific," from a sequence of separate sites in the singer's body (her head and throat) (La Barbara in Ripley 2016: 47). Factors such as the length of each breath, and the consequent variation in efforts to maintain the single note; directions to ease the tension in the throat "and allow tones to fluctuate" or to sustain the tension when especially pleasing sounds are being made; the switch between distinct locations for the sound created, each of these contribute to the disclosing of layers of timbral texture or noise inside the primary signal (La Barbara in Ripley 2016: 56).

Before I begin to discuss the work in more detail, it is worth stating upfront that there is no indication La Barbara's *Voice Piece* was intended to be a drone, even if it can be said to conform in a loose sense to the definition given of the rhythmic drone in the quotation with which this essay began. Presumably, each iteration of a rhythmic drone would be coordinated in an arrangement of measured sounds and silences where the desired duration of each sound and each silence is determined by aesthetic preferences. Strictly speaking, then, *Voice Piece* cannot be a rhythmic drone because its internal structure is decided by other factors I will go on to discuss

in a moment. I interpret *Voice Piece* instead as a work which, perhaps inadvertently, both competes with and exposes the drone in its role as one newly prominent genre in the Minimalist sound repertoire of the time, a genre which does not originate, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought music must, "from the stress and rhythm of natural speech" but in an indifference to those rhythms (Monelle 1992: 3).

In *Voice Piece*, as it appears on *Voice Is the Original Instrument,* a first phoneme, a *wo-* sound, is sustained and permitted to resonate while refusing or neglecting to become speech or song. The full title of the composition is an appropriate name for a quasi-scientific inquiry into the nature of the voice, its tones and timbres. It can also be read as referring to a detached portion of an utterance, one particular element plucked from the panoply of vocal options, to be considered separately for the purposes of a meticulous and methodical analysis of the qualities of the single note subjected to a range of fluctuations in La Barbara's vocal apparatus as it aims to prolong and vary the sound. *Internal* resonance tells us that the sound is influenced or determined by the location from which it emerges in La Barbara's mouth and throat cavities but, just as pertinently, that the investigation pertains to the inside of the one-note, its intrinsic features. Her concentrated focus on the single tone nonetheless develops into what can be heard as a valiant effort to produce a drone without the means to keep it going beyond the length of a single breath.

Samara Ripley has written the most useful and comprehensive description and analysis of La Barbara's early work and her interpretation of *Voice Piece* employs the concepts of *echos* (pure, meaningless sound), *topos* (the place from which a sound emerges) and *logos* (discursive significance) to account for what she sees as an oscillation in its performance between an originary non-semantic music and passages where the sounds "become meaningful" (Ripley 2016: 47). What Ripley has called La Barbara's "resonance placements" imbricate *echos* with *topos* and, she argues, at the point where listeners find themselves able to "at times connect the sounds with specific spots within La Barbara's head and throat…the nature of the sounds as purely *echos*, or non-semantic, begins to change" (50). The "wordless-sounds" we hear acquire "signifying power" because, we are told, "they are representative of La Barbara's body" (50). If, however, we should ask Ripley *what* the sounds we hear mean, what they signify in the moments we identify (or think we identify) where they start in a performer's physique, we may be disappointed to learn that this in fact is all they mean: that they come from this location. This is only interesting because La Barbara's sound-world is, Ripley asserts, strange enough to make this fact easy to forget as you listen: "the unusual nature of her vocalizations creates a separation of sound from source (body) in which the latter does not appear to match the former" (58). Ripley overstates the extent to which La Barbara's voice sounds estranged from the places where it begins when she identifies moments in *Voice Piece* when the sounds made are, she says, "far too low for a female voice" or which "bear notable resemblance to non-human noises, such as the rumbling of a machine." (51) Meaning is supposed to kick in when an *accurate* identification of the sound-source as La Barbara's living, female body becomes possible, but this idea is untenable since a *mistaken* verdict (the sound I hear is being made by a man or by a machine) is arrived at by use of the same "signifying power" as a correct diagnosis. The aspects of *Voice Piece* to which Ripley draws attention here are met during a continuous feat of vocalising we may marvel at for

the performer's stamina and for the anomalous sounds we now and again hear, but I don't believe we experience the encounter either as a securing of meaning or as its loss, depending on whether or not we shift from a wrong identification to a correct one, or vice versa, if that is in fact what we do as we listen.

Ripley's report on the performance is, on the whole, precise and valuable, but her evaluation of the process of becoming-meaningful is underwhelming because the semantic payoff is minimal. A similar problem exists in some music writing informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, where a particular position taken on the subject leads to a hyperbolic and inert account of the consequences of an experience of sound. Paul C. Jasen, responding to a challenge he says was issued by Deleuze, insists that "experience" should not be considered as something undergone by a subject so much as the subject is a "trajectory" composed of momentary orders of "localized patterning" in a field whose "totality is chaotic" (Jasen 2016: 22-3). The concept of the world as fluctuating experiential field giving rise to new subjects is prevalent also in writing on music by Claire Colebrook who, in an essay co-authored with David Bennett, argues that

> [a]ccording to this [Deleuzian] perspective, music would not constitute a referential system: we would read or hear music not as it relates to a system of signs always already given in advance but, rather, according to its capacity to transform bodies, organs and territories. (Colebrook and Bennett 2009: 68)

The promise of radical metamorphoses swiftly winds down to drastically modest, imprecise and occasionally banal reports on the professed novelty of a work based on its divergence from a previous model: "[David Chesworth's *Badlands Suite*] repeats chords and motifs ["composed by Carl Orff"] and draws out variation and difference" (Colebrook and Bennett, 74). Or, the use of the didgeridoo in Peter Sculthorpe's *Earth Cry* "presents a new matter of sound that would then allow us to hear the orchestra, not as one more composed piece in a linear history of music, but as one modality of sound among others" (77). When the advantage of a Deleuzian approach is advertised, often by exaggerated claims, the ontological state it promotes can seem starved and ill-defined: "There is neither a subject nor a world that would speak, cry or perceive; instead, there are encounters among elements that produce discernible points" (78). One reason for these bathetic outcomes is that the style Jasen and Colebrook borrow from Deleuze does not amount to an analysis of the relation between a subject and a musical work. Instead, we are given a fanciful re-description of an event, which effaces the presence and agency of a subject so it can conjure a 'new' subject back as the creation of the encounter it has undergone. Jasen cites a passage by Brian Massumi to describe Jasen's own approach to the meeting of a body and music: "It is a relay between the corporeal and incorporeal dimensions. This is not yet a subject. But it may well be the conditions of emergence of a subject: an incipient subjectivity" (Massumi in Jasen, 24). A more plausible and powerfully challenging method of defining and *eradicating* the subject in its relation to art is to be found in an essay by Keston Sutherland on the contrasting attitudes to subjectivity in the philosophy of Hegel and the work of the poet, J.H. Prynne. Sutherland demonstrates with formidable scholarship and relentless force that for Prynne the subject as "an originating sponsor or process of individual consciousness" is "what must be let go" (Sutherland 2015: 130). The entire context for this particular belief cannot be explored here;

what I want to borrow from Prynne via Sutherland is the undeniable fact that there *is* a subject, and that *you* are most probably it, and that the immediate and absolute prerogative may be to get rid of you-the-subject, not to bring a new one into existence or refurbish an old one until it is unrecognisable. For Prynne, this is part of a complex argument about a shift from poetic thinking associated with an individuated subject position to a coherence of poetic thought liberated from such associations:

> Personal beliefs, memory, emotion, and physiology of personhood are the origins of poetic thought, but they are never the substance of thought once it is achieved. The manifestation of poetic thought depends on finding a way to discard these origins from language, or to leave them behind as language itself reaches toward the thought immanent in its own extremes (Sutherland, 135).

The Deleuzian re-description in Jasen and Colebrook does not consider these four stubborn elements mentioned here as constituting the armature of a subject, but they cannot simply be wished away in order to be conjured into being later as "discernible points" by the magic of the didgeridoo. Prynne's position is articulated as part of an argument about an achievement in language that takes place through the elimination of the enunciation's origins in an individual subject position. Music, because it is not as immediately connected to a system of references in the way that a chain of signifiers are, and because it is therefore less identifiable as a series of communicating utterances, enables a Deleuzian description of musical experience as involving unlocatable and unmoored experiences and perceptions giving rise to an occasional subject. The overlooking of the presence of the composing or listening subject then deprives us of the opportunity and obligation to labour towards the expunging of a figure already too firmly installed.

Ripley's analysis is limited to arguing that La Barbara's music means something only when it points back towards the subject it emerges from, and only ever means this pointing or this emergence; the outcomes for Jasen and Colebrook, despite the expectations of innovation and subjectivization, are similarly modest. Jasen admits as much when describing what he really thinks happens when someone listens to music:

> The implication is not that a total, molar transformation occurs (we do not literally turn into a sound wave). Nor is a becoming-sonic a matter of imitation or metaphor (i.e. play-acting or 'mere' discourse), and this distinction illustrates the difference between mediation and modulation. Where sound and body interact, we can speak of 'an inhumanity, immediately experienced in the body as such.' It is a process of transduction, the sounding of a mind-body and a taking-on – even non-consciously or unwillingly – of certain affects of the impinging force. (Jasen 2016: 24-5)

This sounds less like the irruption of an unprecedented Adamic subject than the mundane situation of being affected by what you hear. *Voice Piece* is especially significant for La Barbara because it accomplishes her transformation from an interpreter and performer into a composer, but an analysis of the listener's experience of the work itself requires an approach which is

attentive to the nature of the restrictions on *Voice Piece's* bearing of meanings, in terms of the distance from language of its sounds.

In a rendition of *Voice Piece*, air is impelled through the vocal folds with a more constant or consistent effort than the modulated forces at work in conventional singing or everyday speech. This fact constitutes the performance as a careful and focussed activity which almost entirely deprives itself of an affective component, by volume control and the adoption of a tone selected primarily on the basis that it is physiologically conducive to the maintenance of the sound. This effort to sustain the neutrality of the one-note produces another obstacle in the way of a semiotic analysis of the drone. Agawu argues that

> a musical work is conceived as a sequence of events [which] are generally assumed to unfold in orderly fashion. To understand a Beethoven sonata or a Liszt tone poem as discourse, therefore, is to understand it as constituted by a set of events which succeed and relate to each other, the whole making a meaningful impression on the listener. (Agawu 2000: 7)

None of the drone-related works we will look at in this essay are the same sound unchanging from beginning to end and I would go as far as to say that each of them could be considered, in different ways, to have been "conceived as a sequence" – *Voice Piece*, as we know, is a sequence of oral variations on one note which follow each other in accordance with the systematic exploration of "resonance placements" as determined in La Barbara's score – but it might be best to consider the structure of these works as involving succession and relation in terms of something we could call extension without *meaningful* alteration. La Barbara's vocal music has nothing much to do with the notion of words set to music where the music corroborates a sense already established in words which pre-existed it. *Voice Piece* is produced in the refusal or prolonged reluctance of a phoneme to become a word and, therefore, to take on a definition. Topological resonance effects and the shift into multiphonics in the final third of *Voice Piece* are not modifications in an utterance which is trying to persuade a listener of something. If there can be said to be a law of the drone then it appears to promote the generation of the same, or the very similar, with the one-note or interval or chord or sound as both minimal and maximal unit. From the perspective of the semiotician, the refusal to countenance extending to two or three notes in a staged succession suggests that the drone says nothing or attempts to say the least that can be said. If the drone is music and music is discourse then the drone is the arrestation or abortion of discursivity at its hypothetical inaugural point, at the moment where one initial sound is produced but before something or anything else happens, and it is also the effort to remain at that limit. One consequence is that, contra Ripley, the lapses in sound when La Barbara breathes in again are as good an index of meaning than anything in the sounds themselves.

With the gradual extension of the phoneme into the drone during the longer passages of *Voice Piece*, we start to experience our anticipation of the unavoidable failure of breath in La Barbara, and listen to her attempt to delay the arrival of its end. This kind of sustained phonation depends upon the vocalist's facility in conserving a stable tautness in the flexible tissues of the vocal mechanism and diaphragm, while keeping the vocal folds in a condition where they are still

supple and slack enough to move rapidly. The sounds produced tend to begin with strong vibrations, amplified by the throat, which decompose into a more quiet voice marked by different levels of fry, as less energy gets expended so that the investigation can be prolonged. When the sound is cut and we lapse into silence, it tends not to be when La Barbara feels herself wavering from the one note, since the investigation is concerned in part with precisely the forces which cause this to happen and their outcomes. The particular note, the *wo-* sound, was chosen because it is relatively easy to manage its prolongation compared to other sounds. If it was uttered as the first moment of an act of verbal communication what we would be waiting for is the articulation of a consonant. The movement from one vowel to another can be managed by recalibrating the tone of a resonance, and a consonant acts as the cut which forms word boundaries; in many cases the consonant might stop the breath momentarily. Some consonant sounds are described by phoneticians as 'stops,' since they briefly discontinue other kinds of consonant or vowel sound that could hypothetically have been sustained, and make a pause before progress to the next sound, usually by closing up an aperture, the rim of the mouth or the glottis.

P is an unvoiced labial stop. *F* is a labiodental, spirant sound. One can be held and sustained to the end of the breath, and one cannot. A word-initial sound like *BR* is, like *F*, sustainable. A sound made from a mouthful of air can only constitute a drone if certain rules of selection or operation are followed: the sound you start with enables and affects the development or extension of the sound. La Barbara's performance stops briefly at the end of each breath and, before that, the sound of her voice labouring, the exertion of different kinds and degrees of force, makes something else ring out in the note, something which is both more and less than the letter or syllable: the internal fissures in the note, the sound of friction, the resistance her body puts up to the sounding of its own voice. The voice is compromised by the incorporation which makes it possible, and the compromise involves further incorporations, of spacing, texture and silence in the sounds. The silence we can hear at the end of each part of *Voice Piece* is a constituent of the sound which precedes it since within each note differentials are revealed by the effort of extension which generates the one-note as a drone. Efforts have been made by some composers and musicians related to Minimalist practice to generate a drone by eradicating the limitations imposed by the human body, limitations such as the need to breathe, or the problems generating a drawn-out note on the viola when we are hampered and prevented by the shape, position, and size of the instrument, the length of the human arm and its jointed articulation. Electronic processing makes it possible to go on and on breathlessly, and to eliminate the micropause at the end of a player's gesture which is still discernible in performances of *Trio for Strings* by La Monte Young. Young, according to Keith Potter, had requested "the production of a smooth, steady bow stroke while also minimizing the audibility of the change of bow direction so that the long sustained tones sound as uninterrupted as possible" (Potter 2000: 35). Along the same lines, Branden W. Joseph mentions the use of aerophones in the execution of Young's *Vision* "to sustain tones of any duration that, by chance, had been determined to exceed what a brass or woodwind player could normally achieve without drawing breath" (Joseph 2011: 86). Potter sums up this tendency when he remarks that "Minimalism, with its contrast-free continuity of drones, repetitions, processes and so on, tends not to breathe" (Potter 2013: 7). Holding and being held by the one-note, at the point before it is modified to become a unit in an utterance which has a meaning or meanings, donates to the one-

note an array of attenuated implications which must include a measure of *pathos* from the disclosure of a mortal human subject most obvious in the gaps between sounds as the breath fails. If La Monte Young's drones would repress breaks and transitions, La Barbara's inhalations constitute an accidental act of interference in the generation of a drone by a body and a subject. The *electronic* drone, on the other hand, is not propelled or confined by human musculature, its extension is not driven by the continuous effort of a body. When we listen to a track such as Eleh's "Bass Pulse in Open Air," the disembodied origin of the sounds we hear, and not just those sounds 'themselves,' generates a local sensation of buoyancy in the experience of the pulsations, and a more general pleasure in the fluctuations in repetition of the pulses. We listen to the pulses move as a metamorphosing sound surface and may even have a sense of participating in their motion as we are carried along by it. The extended title of the track tells us that the frequencies we hear float, but it also cannot help but direct our listening and thinking from the music back to the conveyance of blood through the arteries by the contractions of the heart, the idea of the pulse used as a temporal measure to indicate the vitality of the body, even as the rest of the title seems to propose that the low and deep and rounded frequencies were recorded or (more likely) are meant to be heard across a clear, outside space, set up to allow the free passage of the sounds extending and expanding outwards *ad infinitum*.

Eleh insists upon their music being played at very high volume and, if possible, simultaneously from different directions, and this insistence contributes to extending the production of sound beyond the idea of its origin in a human body, since the sound is no longer coming from one identifiable, local vantage point but a surroundsound field where the demarcation between inside and outside is elided. When the conditions are right, the music is experienced as *in* you going outwards as if *from* you, and in part that is where it is coming from, since what we hear includes combination tones and location effects, sounds *in* us and *not* in the drone, while the drone/pulsations are also coming *at* us all the time, in us and still coming at us from an outside, from everywhere. The deliberate inducing of combination tones and location effects presupposes a subject in which they can be induced, since we can only hear what is not present *if we are*.

The separate and very different practices of La Barbara and Eleh are comparable in their affirmations and negations of the subject as sounds and silences are exchanged and extended across spaces and durations. La Barbara and Eleh both affirm the presence of the subject as sound source and target but negate it in dispensing with the subject as individuated memory-bucket and speaking being.

The final drone-related work I would like to consider is perhaps the closest of the three to what might be considered a pure drone, at least for most of its extent: Keiji Haino's "Wisdom that will bless I, who live in the spiral joy born at the utter end of a black prayer." The track lasts for just over sixty seven minutes and the principal sound throughout is a drone made from several tone oscillators generating layered sine waveforms which seem to move in and out of sync with each other as Haino intervenes and we listen.

The imbricated frequencies from the oscillators combine to generate a loud, quasi-industrial foreground sound, a challenging compound of hum, buzz and whirr. Listening closely, you can hear the movements of the performer as he makes adjustments to the instruments and,

as these take effect, certain elements of the sound recede and others seem to be brought forward. There are interludes of relative harmony which alternate with periods of dissonance, where interference patterns emerge; both of these kinds of passage-work precipitate effects of rhythmic pulsation, shifting between a deep, swaying throb and accelerating, pitched-up palpitations. Each time the sound appears to have settled into self-similarity, it seems immediately to be transformed by infusion of a new set of tones, or by changes in volume, or changes in our own proximity to the sounds. We can feel jammed tight up against some of these noises, while others go about their business in the middle-distance or far enough away to be almost but not quite inaudible. Since your attention will waver in listening, just as you regain focus on the sound and might know it and grasp it, it alters: this happens as if the drone is listening to you listening and because it is not. Whatever it is doing at any point, it does not stop doing something else too. Around fourteen minutes into the track, the constant sounds are punctuated by sparse but regularly spaced beats on a frame drum, and this accompanies the most static part of the drone; later, at about twenty seven minutes or so in, there is a section where the drone is met by the twang of a stringed instrument, at times similar to a sitar, being plucked or hammered at a stately pace, low, loose and rattly. At just under the forty minute mark, a series of guttural vowel sounds announce the start of the first vocalizations in the track and these develop to become more like spoken language or singing, though in deep growls not unlike a gentle revision of the vocal style associated with black metal. This becomes a deliberate attempt to harmonize with the drone: Haino's increasingly loud, close-miked utterances momentarily drown out the drone, match it and become it, as the mysterious stringed instrument drops out of the track altogether. The profoundly sonorous vibrations Haino dredges from his vocal cords are, inevitably, terminated like the one-note of La Barbara by inhalations of the performer's breath and the effort towards harmonizing with the drone dwindles into something not unlike snoring, and then muffled barking, as the drone reasserts its primacy. An influx of newly luminous tones reverberating and interacting at a higher pitch seems to clear the track for take-off as the last eight minutes tick down: the overtones at this stage sound like phantom cicadas, and somewhere very far away, almost as much a feeling as it is an auditory effect, auto-tuned cherubim seem to lead the drone into an endless recession, a fading out in potentially infinite diminution where the drone continues beyond the ability of anyone still present to hear it.

Compared to La Barbara's *Voice Piece* or the ominous throbs in "Bass Pulse in Open Air," there are no gaps to be heard in the overlaid drones of "Wisdom that will bless I…" The drone in *every* instance may just be a gap or void in its own right since the semiotician would argue that it cannot bear a meaning of its own. Or perhaps we could think, also and on the contrary, that the drone is technically replete for exactly the same reason, since it has not opened up to the difference which constitutes a system of signs? If both of these interpretations are possible, we could consider the drone as a genre which calls for the intervention of a subject which would always be an opening up to meaning. When Haino's voice eventually adds itself to the unadulterated sound of the oscillators, in doing so, it makes and marks a place in the track. The title of the work may also be the lyrics Haino growls when he makes his attempt to harmonise with the drone. If so, the intoned words situated with respect to the drone announce or give thanks for the imminent gift of wisdom, the ability, in other words, to decide wisely in matters relating to life and conduct, and to excel in his chosen field, as the reward for surviving a profound darkness, for persevering to the utmost extreme of an experience and emerging intact.

His presence as a principle of division or discontinuity suggests that the agent of difference in the drone is always the subject. The drone is divided into a before and an after by the subtle intervention of Haino's light percussive sounds and tentative voicings which, as I have said, begin in Haino's effort to harmonise and merge with the drone, to be it and to learn from it and to depart from it in the experience of a "spiral joy." The lyrics are clearly not 'part of' the drone; it is more precise to say that they accompany it briefly, they exist around it and might be addressed to it, but they do not enjoy the usual 'fit' between music and lyrics where the music's job is to support and confirm the verbal content. Haino's words nevertheless can function as a key to the listener's emotive response, should there be one, since they are themselves a response to the drone, coming from a listener.

As subjects of the drone, Young, La Barbara, Eleh, Haino, you and me, are constituted as different kinds of fissure in the drone, in the form of La Barbara's labour on the inside of the one-note, as it follows the inevitable trajectory of our common breath; in Eleh's deviation effects and the reference back to the bump of the blood in the situation of the body; and the way the self-similarity of an extended drone such as Haino's generates a parallactic outcome where the music seems to change with alterations in the focus of the listener, to the extent that it seems sometimes the listener can make the music slow down and speed up at will.

In a paper addressed to ICE-Z (the International Conference of Esemplastic Zappology) on 16 January 2004 in London, Keston Sutherland produced a commentary on an essay by Frances Hannett about popular song from a Freudian perspective, as part of a critique of the process whereby pop lyrics "with their saccharine buffet of anaclitic affects" train human beings in "the symbols and drives of commodity-love, by which I mean both the love of commodities and love itself in commodified form" (Sutherland 2004: n.p.). Hannett's essay was published in 1964 and analyses songs which "deal with a two-person relationship usually based on unreal, fanciful, extravagant love" which she divides into four categories: Songs of Possessive Dependence; Depressive and Hostile Affects; Songs of Separation Anxiety; and Songs about Dreams as Wish Fulfilment (Hannett 1964: 239). Sutherland argues that the exclusion of "post-war hit songs" from the samples she selects means her work cannot provide what he aims to: the diagnosis of popular music as "possibly the most powerful machinery discovered by capitalism to effect" a transition from "real love fresh from the bubbling libido…into commodity love" (n.p.). But Sutherland is not content with just this task since he ends his paper with three pages of lively commentary discussing the idiosyncratic narcissistic gratification we get from fantasising that the songs we listen to are ours, composed from "our own mental processes," and speculating about the question of what "an irrecuperable art [might] look or sound like" (n.p.).

Sutherland insists that for an irrecuperable art

> [o]ne of the first conditions is that it should totally and violently frustrate the impulse of its consumer to fantasise that it is his own production. How can art be so violent that it resists this kind of individualistic recuperation? At a very basic level, it needs to have within it somewhere or other an unadulterated FUCK YOU in the form of some ethical or political or sexual exhibition that the one-man test audience could never imagine to be his own production, because its confrontation against him is too powerful and total to be

> subsumed under the product-heading of his own immediate cognition. That is, the work of art must have something in it, some moment, that is not capable of being subordinated to the free play of abstract interpretive fantasy that is then declared to be the work of art itself. It needs to get a stranglehold on the imagination of its audience until they are made to gasp out in panic for some real air, rather than the steady drift of ether through the consumption snorkel. It needs at some level to be something that we can't agree with or don't want, even if later, with the benefit of dialectical reflection, we decide that we agree with it on account of its disagreeableness and want it on account of its unwantableness. In fact, irrecuperable art is conceivable as a source of pleasure only with this dialectic up and running. It is a condition of our enjoying the irrecuperable art work that what we most sweetly enjoy is how it offends and needles against the institution of enjoyment itself as the latter exists in and for capitalist culture. (n.p.)

Since the paper is a contribution to a conference on the music of Frank Zappa, we should not be surprised to find that the one example Sutherland furnishes as an example of irrecuperability is The Mothers of Invention's *We're Only In It For The Money*, an essentially satirical work which seems all too readily available for the kind of appropriation by a consumer that he would wish to avoid. Is it possible that the drone might satisfy the given criteria more completely? It is an easy task to imagine a fan gratified by enjoying *not* enjoying something if they believe they are participating in an act of political or sexual dissidence, as the vacillations around the dialectic at the end of the quotation from Sutherland admit. I want to end this essay by speculating briefly on the topic of how far the drone-related musics we have looked at so far might go, given their reticence before language and speech and the subject, in satisfying the requirements of Sutherland's strictures on irrecuperability.

In Hannett's original study, the lure for the listener's unconscious is the articulation of "infantile attitudes" as the manifest content in "the popular lyric" (Hannett, 254). The musical accompaniment to the lyric presumably does no more than help embed this lyric by melodic reinforcement and the adoption of these infantile attitudes help to facilitate the mistaken idea that songs for listeners are "essentially their own creations" (Sutherland, n.p.). Our drones, however, are instrumental, for the most part. In *Voice Piece*, although only a voice is heard, it is used as an instrument with, as we have seen, an absolutely minimal or minimised reference to speech or language. Haino's drone, the only track with words, could nevertheless be considered just as instrumental as the others, since the lyric's task when voiced is to disappear into the sound of the oscillators, blending the reference to prosodies which originate in the body as oral (La Barbara) and as pulse-based through capillary action (Eleh) into the sustainable inorganic frequencies of the machine. None of the drones considered here are communicative by reference to speech in the mode of the popular song and in comparison our experience of the drone is defined by our inability to interpret a linguistic supposition. Is this enough to thwart the "animistic thinking" which Sutherland claims is enabled by a culture industry promoting narcissism as the apotheosis of the commodification of love?[1] It is clearly not the sublime and

[1] Sutherland explains the music fan's predisposition to "consume music-commodities as if they were our own mental processes" by reference to a discussion of "animistic thinking" from Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, which is said to originate "in the belief that thoughts themselves are

"unadulterated FUCK YOU" which violates the imagination of the listener-consumer, but the drone's impressive indifference to the presence of a listener might be more appropriate in the service of Sutherland's aims. The enjoyment of confrontation in a hostile encounter between song and audience might just be bracing and mutually reinforcing, an acknowledgement confirming each party in their place. On the other hand, only enunciating the labio-dental, spirant sound at the beginning of FUCK, for an hour, say, whether punctuated by stops or artificially sustained, offers little or no expressive content to an interpreter and its Minimalist performance of breathlessness might also make an audience, in Sutherland's words, "gasp out in panic for some real air" (n.p.).

The drone, unlike popular song *and* so-called irrecuperable art, makes no demand for a response, for reciprocity. We are unlikely to surprise ourselves by finding that we have been singing along in our heads with *Voice Piece*, "Bass Pulse in Open Air" or "Wisdom That Will Bless I…." and the phenomenon previously noted, the deviation effect which allows the subject of the drone to imagine they can affect the 'tempo' of the sounds they hear, only confirms the difficulty of mistaking yourself as their origin because the illusory influence can only temporarily be maintained. On the other hand, it is this very indifference on the part of the drone, the impression it gives that it will continue on, oblivious and unmoved with respect to our approval or its withholding, our presence or our absence, which elicits from an artist like Haino his petition for self-improvement. The drone is a ruthlessly consistent music which does not listen to the listener, does not answer to it, and does not assign it a particular position by conveying a meaning of its own in order to shore up the hopeless inconsistency of the human subject. Its indomitable sufficiency is a challenge and lure to any self who would intervene in its immanence and introduce difference, desire, dialectics. These facts, together with the extraordinary tonal, durational and instrumental variety available to the genre of the drone, may help explain why the drone, beginning as an ur-Minimalist trope, has become so remarkably widespread in contemporary musical culture and remains so persistently influential.

References

Agawu, Kofi. 2009. *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Colebrook, Claire and David Bennett. 2009. "The Sonorous, the Haptic and the Intensive." *New Formations* 66 (5): 68-80.

Hannett, Frances. "The Haunting Lyric – The Personal and Social Significance of American Popular Songs," *The Psychoanalytical Quarterly* 33: 226-269.

"omnipotent"" so that the world is experienced as "a spectacle of our own creation, its events and appearances governed by our own essentially infantile thinking" (Sutherland 2004, n.p.).

Jasen, Paul C. 2016. *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.

Joseph, Branden W. 2011. *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*. New York: Zone Books.

La Barbara, Joan. 2002. "Voice is the original instrument." *Contemporary Music Review* 21 (1): 35-48.

La Barbara, Joan. 2003. "Notes." Liner notes for *Voice Is The Original Instrument: Early Works*, Lovely Music, compact disc.

Monelle, Raymond. 1992. *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*. Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Potter, Keith. 2000. *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gann, Kyle, Keith Potter, and Pwyll Ap Siôn. 2013. "Introduction." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*. Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Ripley, Samara. 2016. "Joan La Barbara's early explorations of the voice." MA thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Sutherland, Keston. 2004. "What's The Ugliest Part of Your Market-Researched Anaclitic Affect Repertoire? [*Franz Zappa als Anlehnungstypuskritik*]." Paper presented at ICE-Z (International Conference of Esemplastic Zappology), London, January 16. http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/ice-z/keston.htm

Sutherland, Keston. 2014. "Sub Songs versus the subject: critical variations on a distinction between Prynne and Hegel." *On the Late Poetry of J.H. Prynne*. Brighton: Hix Eros: 123-143.

Tagg, Philip. 2003. "Drone." In *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume 2: Performance and Production*, edited by John Sheperd et al, 532. London and New York: Continuum.

Discography

Eleh. *Floating Frequencies: Intuitive Synthesis III - Phase Two:* "Bass Pulse In Open Air." Important Records, 2008, vinyl.

Keiji Haino. "Wisdom That Will Bless I, Who Live In The Spiral Joy Born At The Utter End Of A Black Prayer." *So, Black Is Myself.* Alien8 Recordings, 1997, compact disc.

Joan La Barbara. *Voice Is The Original Instrument*. Wizard records, 1976, vinyl.