

and new forms of reverberation that proliferated from the 1960s onward.⁷⁰ Attali may have had just enough critical distance to pen a book that for all its absurd hubris—or more likely, because of it—articulated one of the central sonic problems of Western culture up to that moment.

Attali says as much himself: “We see emerging, piecemeal and with the greatest ambiguity, the seeds of a new noise, one exterior to the institutions and customary sites of political conflict.” Attali calls this new age one of “composition,” and his musical examples in this section are drawn from improvisational jazz and new directions in art music. “In composition, stability, in other words, differences, are perpetually called into question. Composition is inscribed not in a repetitive world, but in the permanent fragility of meaning after the disappearance of usage and exchange.” His language is strident and utopian, in the socialist tradition. For Attali, composition is a utopia because it figures (or prefigures, since for him sonic codes herald coming social orders) the end of the separation between use and economic exchange.⁷¹

Contemporary writers tend to associate this age of composition with the rise of digital audio, the boom in sound art, the growth of sampling and recombinant music, and the wave of music piracy online and on the streets of many major cities.⁷² Yet despite their attractiveness to many people (this author included), none of those practices has quite taken on the utopian tack that would be necessary to fulfill the dreams that come at the end of *Noise*, even if each of them issues its own challenge. Digital audio reduces the cost of recording, but it remains firmly rooted in the ideologies and practices of several communication industries. Digital recording technologies may do just as much to standardize the sound of music—through the proliferation of standards and presets and the tastemaking done by mastering engineers⁷³—as to challenge those standards. The boom in sound art challenges the revered status of the museum, the musician, and the composer but it also upholds those notions, if only in the negative. Far too often artists still fetishize noise as transgression or a challenge. Sampling, turntablism, mashups, and remixing all challenge the contemporary order of intellectual property, but they have not undermined it. MP3s may be pirated, but they are products of a money economy and they still operate inside it. A quick look at the available recordings on popular file-sharing sites reveals that the most available recordings are also frequently among the bestsellers.

It may be just as much the case that Attali saw the beginning of the end

of his whole conceptual edifice, a set of changes that unsettle the orders of noise he put forward before him. At the very least, that is how I have come to see his moment. To honor Attali's questions, if not his answers, let us use the neologism *decompositionism* to describe the new malleability of sound and noise across cultural domains that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. That epithet is vague enough that we don't have to see it as the spirit of a whole age or a total social condition (or even a "school" of engineering or artistic practice). We can conceive it merely as a way of thinking and doing things with sound.⁷⁴ Its origins clearly lie in perceptual technics, as in Homer Dudley's claim that in his vocoder's "synthesizing process, only the specifications for reconstructing the sound wave are directly transmitted," rather than the sound itself.⁷⁵ From psychoacoustics to oil drilling to architecture to sound installations to DJ battles to granular synthesis to cellular telephony to noise-canceling headphones, sound-reproduction technology renders sound meaningful and effective through processes that analyze it, decompose it, and reassemble it.

But decomposition goes beyond the desire to decompile and recompile sound, to analyze it and synthesize it. Decompositionism also has a managerial streak, where all sound and noise is potentially useful and possible to organize. Decompositionism demystifies noise, but it also demystifies sound and hearing in the service of perceptual technics. Through vast technical infrastructures and a new common sense, sound and noise became audio, and audio could be disassembled, isolated into its components, and then administered. Instead of allowing noise to endure as a threat to order, decompositionism gave noise its place within the world of sound and signal. Sometimes noise is hidden away; sometimes it is endowed with meaning and portent; and sometimes it is simply let be.

Decompositionism was just emerging across many fields in the 1960s and 1970s, and remained far from a total social condition or a dominant theory of sound of any kind. Even today, noise is still a threat to many people in many situations, and its elimination is still a principle in many arenas of practice, from a never-ending procession of noise-suppression-strategies engineering to the politics of urban zoning laws. Many people still believe that taking sound apart does some violence to it. Decompositionism merely opened up the possibility of a plurality of relationships to noise for engineers, for listeners, and for many others through the total disassembly of sound. Decompositionism heralded neither a utopia where people would be freed from exchange nor a "grey world" of endless, mean-