

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

**cabinet**

## Soothe Operator: Muzak and Modern Sound Art, by Susette Min (Issue 7, Summer 2002)

In his 1967 address “The Eco-Logic of Muzak,” for Muzak’s Scientific Board of Advisers, Dr. James Keenan, an industrial psychologist from Stanford University, spoke of Muzak as being “synomorphic with the modern world and interrelated with all matters of time and place: Muzak helps human communities because it is a nonverbal symbolism for the common stuff of everyday living in the global village.”<sup>1</sup> Keenan characterizes Muzak not merely as background music, but as a “language” that builds utopias through sweet and soothing harmonies.

Better known as a sonic backdrop (rather than an intrusion) for everyday activities within public spaces, Muzak creates a mellow-yellow environment that brightens up one’s days, recharges one’s energies, alleviates stress, and calms frayed nerves.<sup>2</sup> Indeed on 29 July 1945, after a B-24 bomber crashed into the Empire State Building’s 79th floor, the canned music became known as an effective tranquillizer that pacified anxious people stuck in the glass-encased observatory nine floors above. Today Muzak functions, as Professor Gary Gumpert aptly puts it in a 1990 documentary on background music, as “just a kind of amniotic fluid that surrounds us; and it never startles us, it is never too loud, it is never too silent; it’s always there.”<sup>3</sup> For the socially inept, Muzak works as a prophylaxis to fill in awkward pauses during a conversation and, at its most functional, it serves to mask dissonant noises from street construction or building renovations. For most people, however, Muzak is synonymous with harmless background music that samples tunes from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, or it is seen as just another vehicle for broadcasting songs already in circulation. This latter development goes back to 1984, when Muzak began offering foreground music or, in layman’s terms, programs of current hits by original artists.

On the surface, Muzak as an “artfully contrived regimen of unobtrusive harmonies and pitches; metronomic repetition; melodic segments that overlap into a tonal wash” seems annoying at worst.<sup>4</sup> Yet Muzak produces a place where bodies listen and circulate within commodified walls through metaphorical acoustic wallpaper. It operates as anesthetic or what Joseph Lanza calls an “audioanalgesia”: a process that dulls the ability to listen critically.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Muzak produces a programmed environment that enables one to relax in order to work more efficiently, and to browse more intently in order to consume. Muzak sonically rambles with a purpose.

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In fact, Muzak is scientific to its very core. Masterminds like Frederick Winslow Taylor, author of *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911)—and not Ludwig van Beethoven—are Muzak’s central influences. The Taylor system determined, through time and motion studies, the most efficient methods by which to organize modern industrial work. The correlation between music and the psychological and physiological responses it evoked was of great interest to industrialists, managers, and engineers. Before Muzak’s official naming in 1922 by Brigadier General George Squier, Thomas Edison had already conducted phonographic mood tests in factories in 1915 to determine the extent to which music masked disruptive noise and raised morale. But it was Squier’s refined implementation of high-frequency radio signals through low-frequency power lines and his pioneering vision of “centralized transmissions within a rationalized system of stimulus codes” that revolutionized the mechanization of music as well as the world of telecommunications. After discovering that he could send radio music over power-lines, Squier formed a company called Wired Radio through which he began to sell canned music to different consumer businesses. Squier eventually changed the name of his company from Wired Radio to Muzak by combining the words “music” and “Kodak”, a popular company headed by George Eastman, which, by the 1920s, was known worldwide for its jingle, “You press the button, we do the rest.”<sup>6</sup>

The structural elements (beats per minute, play frequencies, etc.) that make up Muzak’s compositions and tracks are studied, then meticulously selected and calculated. Developed in the 1960s, Muzak’s “Stimulus Code” is based on an hourly cycle of gradually changing intensity that climaxes every fifteen minutes while purporting to reenergize human activity. Within each of these segments, tunes are ordered from the least to the most stimulating. In the late 1940s, Dr. Harold Burriss-Meyer and Richard L. Cardinell’s experiments in music composition (elimination of loud brasses and vocals and emphasis on strings and woodwinds) had revealed a direct increase in production efficiency. Muzak executive Don O’Neill implemented their experiments and made the Stimulus Progression the core of Muzak’s innovation and success. Over the years, the Stimulus Progression has been honed and improved technically by engineers such as Ben Selvin and in studies conducted by Lever Brothers, Fairfield University’s language laboratory, as well as by the US Army Engineering labs. The Stimulus Code, with its values of rhythm, tempo, instrumentalization, moods, and ensemble size, combined with strategies of sequencing, timing, and volume (vocal impact), culminates in the Stimulus Progression’s Ascending Curve. The Curve works with and counters the Fatigue Cycle in order to stimulate and reinvigorate workers to be more efficient and focused.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 19th century, fatigue had replaced boredom in hindering surplus production. That is, fatigue, as a central nervous and psychological phenomenon, became, according to historian Anson Rabinbach, “the most apparent and distinctive sign of the external limits of body and mind, the most reliable indicator of the need to conserve and restrict

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the waste and misuse of the body's unique capital—its labor power.”<sup>8</sup> The brusque tempo of the city, the routinized labor, and the constant running of the factory's machines linked the experience of fatigue with the demands of industrial society. Studies and experiments on fatigue and its inverse, energy conservation and conversion, figured the worker's body “as a productive force and as a political instrument whose energies could be subjected to scientifically designed systems of organization.”<sup>9</sup>

The Stimulus Progression's Ascending Curve creates a sense of forward movement to counteract the worker's Fatigue Cycle by acting against the cycle's efficiency curve. The finale at the end of a cycle is a more upbeat tune that coincides with the cycle's peak, followed by fifteen minutes of silence, which gives the listener a break that prevents Muzak from becoming a distraction. Stimulus Progression is a system that provides people with a psychological “lift,” an unconscious sense of forward movement achieved through programming sound in fifteen-minute blocks.

From another perspective, there is a large and growing movement of different factions that have passionately advocated for the eradication of Muzak or the boycott of places of business that utilize Muzak. These movements have centered on the perceived intrusion of Muzak into public space and on its canned-culture assault on individualism and creativity. There have been many attempts to eliminate Muzak, whether through legislation, high profile campaigns, or attempted buy-outs such as heavy-metalist Ted Nugent's \$10 million bid to purchase the company in order to destroy it. Last year in the British House of Parliament, Salisbury MP Robert Key brought forth his Ten-Minute Rule bill that would outlaw Muzak in almost all “public” places. The measure lost despite the efforts by high-profile organizations such as Pipedown, whose “Campaign for Freedom against Piped Music” is supported by well-known figures such as author Stephen Fry, actor Tom Conti, and conductor Sir Simon Rattle.

Also in this category are the composers of ambient music who share a similar aversion to Muzak and who seem to have the most at stake in distinguishing themselves from its effects. Although at times the aural distinction between Muzak and ambient music may be tenuous at best, the difference seems to lie in the latter's attention to the acoustic structure of an environment and an appropriation of it through composition and style. Brian Eno, who first coined the term ambient music, sums it up best in the liner notes from his record *Music for Airports/Ambient 1* (1978). Brian Eno argues that whereas Muzak serves as lightweight background music, ambient music focuses precisely on the spatiality of what makes up a “background”—its idiosyncratic atmosphere and acoustic surroundings. Eno writes, “...Muzak's intention is to ‘brighten’ the environment by adding stimulus to it (this supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms)... [In contrast] ambient music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.” Ambient music's use of repetitious

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rhythmic patterns, attention to the timbre-based qualities of a human voice rather than the actual lyrics, and the visualization of the vertical or architectural color of sound, tend toward the maintenance of a singular and even balance of tone and noise that is aimed to better suit the encompassing spatial dimensions of an environment. Ambient music invites one to pay attention to the noise and sounds surrounding our daily lives, whereas Muzak standardizes it in order to control space.

Essentially, Muzak is a system designed to eliminate wasteful energy. However, it has taken up multiple guises in today's global, postmodern era. The moving target of Muzak has shifted from the realm of production to the realm of consumption as it colors the landscape of commodities. Today the music may be varied and even hip and eclectic, yet its effects of uniformity and intensification of consumer consumption are sinister. The mode of address has diversified in its offering of tunes that cross the intersections of race, class, sex, and gender. On one hand, Muzak gives the illusion of a democratic space, an unlimited choice of songs ranging from urban beats to country currents to Fiesta Mexicana to jukebox gold. On the other hand, it effaces the listener, and turns the body into a site of experimentation and mass production: a passive yet industrious automaton.

Muzak as the bad object operates almost like a colonial tool, producing a sonic landscape laden with metaphorical maneuvers of invasion, dispossession, and surveillance through mechanized sound. It has the potential to seep not only through walls, but to become part of the foundational structure of a building. In their recent move to update their corporate image, Muzak's officials now present themselves not as a group of scientists but as "audio architects," interior designers who specialize in "audio imaging" the spa, restaurant, or boutique near you. Due to falling revenue and increased competition, Muzak has been forced to update its corporate image with the help of the multi-disciplinary design firm Pentagram. Vice President of Marketing for Muzak, Kenny Kahn, hails the change as follows in an article focusing on its corporate makeover: "...we have a new way of talking about the company. The product has a face... Pentagram gave us a visual foundation that lets us actively and creatively show people what music can do for them. Design has not only been great for Muzak's business; design has given Muzak its soul."<sup>10</sup>

Muzak's threat to create panoptic spaces that produce automatons is barely, if at all, perceived. As Georg Simmel wrote back in 1903 about the resilience of the human body under the strain of modernity, our ears adjust to the constant hum of disruptions and urban noise, and we continue to just go with the flow. Even Joseph Lanza, who looks critically at Muzak, somewhat redeems it at the conclusion of his book as he writes, "Elevator music (besides just being good music) is essentially a distillation of the happiness that modern technology has promised. A world without elevator music would

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be much grimmer than its detractors (and those who take it for granted) could ever realize.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet the contemporary art of Annette Weisser, Ingo Vetter, and David Schafer makes Muzak strange, disrupting its smooth operations and our passive reception. More importantly, their art challenges us to consider how man-made elements of place—from the sound coming out of the walls to the lights on the ceilings—alter our perceptions, motivations, and formations of subjectivity. In RESITE, German artists Weisser and Vetter propose to build a sound system within the sound system already installed in the central square of Zeewolde, a town located in Holland.<sup>12</sup> By overlapping ambient music composed of sounds they collect around the square with a system already playing Muzak, Weisser and Vetter highlight the specific qualities of an environment instead of muffling it with Muzak in order to, in the words of Brian Eno, “accommodate many levels of listening without enforcing one in particular.”<sup>13</sup>

Through more confrontational means, Los Angeles-based artist David Schafer tweaks Muzak’s role as “soothe operator” by fiddling with its Stimulus Progression in the CDs *x10R.1 (two second gap)* and *x10R.2 (variable gap)*.<sup>14</sup> They are works of art that can be heard over a stereo or, more effectively, through a Walkman. Ironically, it was the Walkman’s emergence in 1979 that momentarily disrupted the seamless stream of Muzak piping out of office public-address systems, insofar as it allowed for the creation of individual private sonic spheres within the public sphere. Schafer’s purposely cacophonous CDs provoke an intense feeling of being out of place and out of sorts.

Schafer’s “Times Ten Resequenced with Variable Gap” (*X10R.2*) presents a medley of well-known tunes by Muzak composers and arrangers: Les Baxter, Bert Kaempfert, Andre Kostelanetz, Paul Mauriat, and Hugo Winterhalter.<sup>15</sup> By studying the physiological and psychological effects and applications of Muzak, Schafer’s CD turns Muzak inside out, revealing its abject intentions and effects. In his selection of Muzak’s greatest hits based on their varying instrumentation and moods, Schafer’s CD medley begins with a chorus of haunting voices followed by a variation of overlapping melodies that become excessive, disorienting, almost nauseating. At different moments within the duration of its play (58.41 minutes to be exact), one can discern fleeting instances of recognizable TV and film tunes, from *The Godfather* theme to Frances Lai’s score for *A Man and a Woman*. Catchy, saccharine tunes (better known as “champagne music”) crescendo into an orchestral ensemble of violins, horns, and harps with brief breaks of applause that explode the monaural sound of Muzak. In contrast to the sense of distended time that Muzak offers, the noise in Schafer’s CD is obtrusive and chaotic, condensing time to produce a claustrophobic space. Visually, I imagine the effect would resemble something like the shattering of a vase with shards of glass exploding everywhere or a

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stroboscopic flickering of pea-green, burnt-sienna, and pungent-yellow colors. In other words, listening to *x10R.2* is far from a pleasant experience, but it is a fascinating one.

In the spirit of the Situationists and John Cage, Schafer's tactics undermine the soothing tunes of Muzak. At the same time, Schafer, an astute operator himself, knows both how to manipulate and recede into the background. Listening to Schafer's CD will not train one to be like Mucho Mass, the character in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* who discerns Muzak's string compositions and rhythmic ebb and flow. Rather, in contrast to the low level of attention that Muzak thrives on, Schafer's CD forces one to pay attention in a kind of drunken stupor. The experience of listening to Schafer's CDs is not pretty, but it pokes a hole in Muzak's seductively orchestrated operations, as it simultaneously revitalizes the ritual use of our perception.

1. Quoted in Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (New York: Picador, 1994), p. 150.
2. See Lanza, *Elevator Music*, especially the bibliography, pp.225-266; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Bill Gifford's special issue on Muzak in the online magazine *Feed* at [www.feedback.com/95.10gifford/95.10gifford1.html](http://www.feedback.com/95.10gifford/95.10gifford1.html) [link defunct—Eds.].
3. Lanza, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. David Lindsay, "The Muzak Man," *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* vol. 14, no. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 52-57. Also see his *House of Invention: The Secret Life of Everyday Products* (New York: The Lyons Press, 2000).
7. Lanza, pp. 48-49.
8. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 6.
9. Rabinbach, p. 2.
10. Kenny Kahn, "Muzak on Key," *The Journal of Business and Design*, vol. 7, no.1, available at [www.cdf.org/issue\\_journal/muzak\\_on\\_key.html](http://www.cdf.org/issue_journal/muzak_on_key.html).
11. Lanza, p. 233.
12. Their proposal can be found on [www.verbeelding.nl/ukinfo3\\_b.html](http://www.verbeelding.nl/ukinfo3_b.html) [link defunct—Eds.].
13. From Brian Eno's liner notes to *Music for Airports/Ambient 1*.
14. David Schafer's *x10R.1 (two second gap)* and *x10R.2 (variable gap)* were released as a double CD in early 2002 on the Transparency label. See [www.transparency.tv](http://www.transparency.tv).
15. For some, the Muzak composers and arrangers selected by Schafer may seem "out-dated" insofar as Muzak has adopted in its recent compilation of tunes soft hits produced in the 1980s and 1990s. Bill Gifford writes, "As Muzak evolves, narrowing the gap between itself and popular music, it has become pop's *Doppelgänger*. On the new Muzak, a Steely Dan tune still sounds like a Steely Dan tune; Bonnie Raitt like Bonnie Raitt, more or less. But not quite..." See the special issue on Muzak in *Feed* magazine