

## **Irreducible listening: sound unseen and unspoken**

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**Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice**, by Brian Kane, Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, 336 pp., £44.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780199347841 / 2016, 336 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780190632212

**The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago**, by François J. Bonnet, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2016, 364 pp., £14.99 (paperback) ISBN: 9780993045875

Brian Kane, in the pages of this journal, has diagnosed a split in sound studies scholarship, between on one hand studies in auditory culture, understood as research into the cultural, social, technological, and political constitution of sound and listening, and on the other a more recent turn to an approach which focuses on the ontology of sound, attempting to explore the fundamental nature of sound prior to cultural or phenomenological mediation (Kane 2015). This split is anticipated in the closing pages of Kane's *Sound Unseen*. Here he speaks in particular of sound theorists who draw from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (Kane 2014, 225, 247n7), theorists who, as elaborated upon in the later text, make use of posited ontological universals such as vibratory matter and affect in an attempt to get 'beyond' the representation and signification that they claim is the sole terrain of research into auditory culture (Kane 2015, 16).

Kane argues, however, that an undue emphasis on the undermining of cultural and other representations in these enquiries into the ontology of sound has masked the extent to which ontological commitments themselves are constituted in and through particular cultural contexts. An ontological approach which does not take into consideration auditory culture, contends Kane, cannot but operate with the baggage of uninterrogated assumptions and presuppositions which, at a philosophical level, leave us firmly entrenched in a classical set of dualisms and essentialisms. From a similar perspective, Kane contrasts what he describes as this 'Deleuzian' approach to sound studies (2) to the project of *Sound Unseen*. Where the former is "object-oriented",<sup>1</sup> Kane's approach is "subject-oriented", focusing on the diverse cultural practices and techniques of listening which are knotted together under shared "forms of life" (Kane 2014, 223).

This assessment of divergent approaches to sound is a key outcome of Kane's remarkable enquiry into the historical basis and theoretical stakes of acousmatic sound. In sound studies and experimental music circles the word *acousmatic* is well-known and on first appearances its meaning is pleasingly transparent—referring simply to "a sound that one hears without seeing what causes it" (3). Kane, however, questions the transparency afforded to the term in many of its invocations, carefully tracing its historical, philosophical, musicological, and etymological roots in extraordinary detail to expose a much richer and more multi-faceted concept than is immediately apparent. By extracting the acousmatic from the common usage in which it refers to an essential or

mythological character of sound, Kane shows that the term *acousmatic sound* can be understood as being interchangeable with *acousmatic listening*. The acousmatic, separated from essentializing and mythologizing characterizations, is not a quality intrinsic to sounds as such, not an ahistorical foundation, but rather concerns techniques and practices of listening (223).

If Kane emphasizes a sound studies focused on subjective and cultural practices of listening, at first glance François J. Bonnet's *The Order of Sounds* may seem to stand in opposition to this approach and fall into the 'Deleuzian' strand of sound studies. Bonnet's text is suffused with a worry concerning how the subjective, cultural, and social articulation of sound is doomed to reify and fetishize the sonorous, to be linked to modes of power and authority through which listening no longer concerns a primal, physiological act of hearing but only the iteration and reiteration of discursive codifications of the sensible (Bonnet 2016, 204). And, indeed, the theoretical centerpiece to Bonnet's attempted recovery of the sonorous owes much to the thought of Deleuze. Bonnet utilizes Deleuze's furtive early ruminations on a conceptual difference between continental and oceanic islands in order to orient Bonnet's own formulation of the heterogeneous field of sound that he terms the "sonorous archipelago" (265), and, moreover, Deleuze & Guattari's concept of deterritorialization is key to Bonnet's attempt to give voice to sound, to let the sonorous speak not through its discursive articulation but through its own expressivity (272).

Stylistically, Bonnet's text also has much in common with those that Kane categorizes as 'Deleuzian'. Where Kane takes a single term and intricately unfolds it, *The Order of Sounds* passes through an at times overwhelming stream of names, reference points, and theoretical modulations, bolstered by a classically 'Deleuzian' deployment of neologisms. There is, to be sure, a notable and important distinction between these authors' respective approaches in this regard. This should not, however, obscure the significant and critical resonance between these works, a resonance which could do much to chart a greater dialogue and reciprocity between seemingly conflictual areas of sound studies.

It is significant that for both Bonnet and Kane a key starting point is a critical, but importantly sympathetic, analysis of the acousmatic theory of Pierre Schaeffer. Founder of the GRM (*Groupe de recherches musicales*), Schaeffer's pioneering work in this context, developing new technological methods of composition accompanied by an increasingly detailed theory of sound and listening, has made him a focal point for many practices and theorizations of electronic music, the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical avant-garde, and, now, sound studies. Kane and Bonnet engage with this legacy from somewhat different angles. Bonnet approaches it from within the lineage of practice and research which Schaeffer inaugurated, Bonnet himself being a composer and the current artistic director of the GRM. In contrast, Kane could be said to be taking a scholarly distance in his investigation of the impact Schaeffer has had on sound studies and related fields. This separation, however, is not so neat, with Bonnet unwilling to submit to any Schaefferian orthodoxy and Kane taking great care to read Schaeffer with the utmost charity and thoughtfulness. In so doing, both exceed previous critical approaches to

Schaeffer, reaching farther into the depths of Schaeffer's motivating impulses to give both a richer understanding of Schaeffer's theory and a clearer picture of how alternative approaches then resonate, deviate, and depart from Schaeffer's own.

Through his practice of *musique concrète*, Schaeffer is often understood as having a musical interest in sound-in-itself, that is, sound prior to its ordering or structuring, harmonically, culturally, cognitively or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> What both Kane and Bonnet show, however, is not only the idealist character of Schaeffer's approach, but the far-reaching theoretical and musical consequences of this idealism. Kane begins by tracing the development of "reduced listening", Schaeffer's theory of listening through which the audible effects of a given sound are split from its source and cause and rendered as an object of analysis and categorization—as a sound object (Kane 2014, 6). An important consequence of reduced listening and its production of the sound object is that the sound object is not in fact sonorous, it has no necessary relation to the listener hearing sound. The sound object is an ideal object, through which ideal status it can become subject to analysis, comparison, and classification (34) – "in the drive to locate a secure grounding for aural experience, *experience itself falls away*" (36).

By emphasizing Schaeffer's debt to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Kane is careful to avoid the common pitfall in sound scholarship of conflating the acousmatic reduction, as a separation between sound and source, and reduced listening, which discloses the necessary autonomy and objectivity of the sound object (37). Indeed, for Kane it is key that Schaeffer himself recognizes four different modes of listening following the acousmatic reduction, only one of which, *entendre* (attending to the qualities of the sound as such) corresponds to reduced listening. However, there is no necessity to acousmatic listening being reduced listening, and Kane strives to understand how the other modes of acousmatic listening could function, as we see through his masterful unfolding and application of Jean-Luc Nancy's distinction between *entendre* and *écouter*, the latter understood as a listening concerned with context and association (127) in contrast to the formal purity of the former.

Bonnet's approach shows a great admiration for his predecessor, but is likewise not without a critical edge. Like Kane, Bonnet notes the significance of Schaeffer's strong focus on one of the four possible modalities of listening, arguing that there is perhaps even a hierarchy topped by *entendre* (Bonnet 2016, 75), a hierarchy emphasizing that which is typological and fixed in auditory perception rather than, for example, the gradual or the ambiguous. Reduced listening, argues Bonnet, is not so much an unqualified act of listening to given sounds as it is a rational process of producing sounds, what Bonnet calls the "becoming-object" of a practice of listening (104).

For both Kane and Bonnet it is crucial to not only expose and push beyond the contingency of reduced listening, but to recognize that reduced listening indeed has historical precedents of its own. Both authors argue that reduced listening remains all too *musical*. Kane shows that the sound object, contrary from Schaeffer's claims to be discovering a new language of music, in fact follows a lineage of musical phantasmagoria through which transcendent ideas of sound were fully realized in

Romantic notions such as absolute music (Kane 2014, 99). Bonnet, for his part, argues that Schaeffer seeks to discipline the world of sound, integrating noise into music rather than truly questioning the category of the latter (Bonnet 2016, 85). The classically musical tendencies in Schaeffer's thought are themselves an aspect of the phenomenological claim that reduced listening is a rediscovery of an originary experience rather than a historically constituted technique (Kane 2014, 35), that listening stripped of context appears to take place through a "decontextualized, desocialized figure with no history and doubtless no future" (Bonnet 2016,77).

At this point, Bonnet and Kane separate, but the shared lens through which they view the problems of sound does much to bridge their divergent approaches. Of paramount importance for Kane, key to dispelling the myths that surround the acousmatic, is separating the history of the term 'acousmatic' from the history of what has come to be known as acousmatic listening (9). Where Bonnet is quick to label the Pythagorean veil as a mere metaphor, Kane intricately distinguishes between the commonly shared and re-shared myth of the *akousmatikoi*, students of Pythagoras said to have listened to his teachings while he was hidden from sight behind a veil, and the history of the French term *acousmate*. Unravelling these themes in all of their historical complexity and mutability, Kane develops the argument that the history of acousmatic listening is neither a rediscovered Pythagorean origin nor the history of a word, but the history of a related but not equal series of listening practices separating sound from source.

In contrast to Kane's delicate exploration of non-Schaefferian acousmatic listening, Bonnet takes Schaeffer as a departure point for a vast theoretical and historical network of engagements with sound. Bonnet's claims surrounding reduced listening and the sound object lead him to the assertion that "there is no reduced listening" (111), that reduced listening is in fact a single aspect of a more general condition of listening in which the objectivation of sound is inseparable from sound's inscription into culture and history. Key to Bonnet's unfolding theoretical structure is the role of the sound object as an individuation or autonomization of sound, towards permanence and audibility (124). Sound as a reified object of knowledge is no longer an object of sensible engagement, but rather enters into a regime of signs, discourse, a *territory* of sound (131).

From here Bonnet spins a startlingly complex web articulating the tighter and tighter discursive binds we find ourselves in when engaging with sound, pushing against this objectivation of sound by outlining a "desiring-listening" where listening "cannot be assimilated into a pure function of knowledge" (141), recapturing this again through a reading of the fetishization of sound (149), articulating the tension between these tendencies through the assertion of an authoritarian character of listening in which sound again becomes an object of classification and communication (199), before finally again trying to reassert something of sound in its sonority, through what he terms a "schizological" approach (88). With this approach, listening and the discourse of sound are understood not as a holistic unity, but rather in terms of heterogeneous multiplicity—Bonnet speaks of an archipelagic listening which does not seek to identify pre-existing structural arrangements, but rather allows structures to generate in a

plurality which need not coincide with a higher order (268). This leads Bonnet to an attempt to develop an *aphonic* listening, drawing, in Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's term, "oblique strategies" (277) from figures ranging from Georges Bataille to Otto Weininger to John Cage in order to produce a listening which does not speak, pronounce, or write sound, which somehow gives sound a voice of its own. For Bonnet, if we are to evade the sedimentation of sound in discourse, listening "must be submitted to silence [...] Listening must be disarmed" (277).

This theoretical spiral seems very far from the careful excavation of Schaeffer's acousmatic theory we departed from. But Kane and Bonnet can be constructively drawn together again through another shared reference point, Franz Kafka's unfinished short story "The Burrow". In this story a mole-like creature hears an unidentified sound—an acousmatic sound—and takes this not as an opportunity to isolate the sound and treat it solely for its sonorous qualities, but rather spins helplessly into a series of hypotheses about what the source of the sound could possibly be. Both Kane and Bonnet agree that this story, in its evocation of the experience of acousmatic listening, undermines any theory of the sound object and reduced listening. But while Kane's emphasis is on these hypotheses (Kane 2014, 143), Bonnet takes more interest precisely in the sound's imperceptibility, and in the fragile affective states that produce this oscillation between unsatisfactory solutions (Bonnet 2016, 287).

There is perhaps something elusive about the pre-cognitive in Kane's work. On the one hand, Kane's depiction of the relation between sound and fear in "The Burrow" tends to move quickly from unidentified sound to the postulation of hypotheses about this sound. Bonnet, on the other hand, happily dwells on the inchoate moment of fear, and resists reinscribing the sonorous back into discourse. No doubt Kane's discursive, historical model of research bears great fruits—his closing analysis of how the philosophical understandings of voice we find in Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Mladen Dolar find themselves contending with the problems of acousmatic sound is a remarkable display of the sophisticated theoretical tools he gradually develops through *Sound Unseen*. But reading Kane alongside Bonnet may lead us to ask if the desire to go 'beyond' discourse has a critical impulse which will remain even among those of us who do not demand ontological absolutism. Kane, perhaps, cannot fully appreciate nor satisfy the critical and creative urge behind the engagement with the presubjective and the posthuman that characterises those 'Deleuzian' theories concerned with affect.

Bonnet's bold attempt to map sound in every moment of its articulation serves as a bracing gesture towards distancing a 'Deleuzian' approach from an essentialized ontology of sound, emphasizing an "impure" listening where sound is not to be found as a unified essence but only as "a labyrinthine network, an archipelago of discursive apparatuses" (325-36). Indeed, the richness and density of Bonnet's text embodies the sonorous archipelago in all its dazzling confusion. But the deluge of sources in Bonnet's argument risks also having a homogenizing effect. When we move from Derrida to Deleuze, Barthes to Adorno, Bataille to Cage in a matter of pages, while there is certainly satisfaction to be had in the torrent of ideas, we may also ask how these very different thinkers are being integrated into a single framework, even if a pluralistic framework,

and whether the speed with which Bonnet deals with their thought diminishes something of the distinctive offerings they could have for a theory of sound.

Likewise, contrary to the comprehensive feel of Kane's analysis of acousmatic sound, we are left to wonder about routes untaken in Bonnet's own personal sonorous archipelago. Bonnet's key sources remain significantly within the established discourses of continental philosophy and a somewhat traditional Euro-American history of musical experimentation, which may contribute to those moments where he perhaps struggles to evoke that in sound which is ungraspable and mutating, the liminal spaces between discursive regimes. It is surprising, for example, that Edouard Glissant, perhaps the most sophisticated theorist of archipelagic thought, and who brings it into immediate relation with processes of Creolization and the history of colonialism (Glissant 2010), receives only passing mention. The reader may feel that if Bonnet's account took on this additional aspect of historicization, of a global stance, that the vectors of transformation he tries to locate in the field of sound and listening may have become more visible.<sup>3</sup>

Such points aside, with *Sound Unseen* and *The Order of Sounds* we have two remarkable works in the field of sound studies whose differences resonate as much as their similarities. Both authors wish to resist reducing sound to either a physicalist materialism or a solipsistic idealism (Kane 2014, 259n62; Bonnet 2016, 87), but their respective attempts to do so show how diverse a ground lies between those two poles. Philosophically, we are perhaps finally entering a moment where meaningful dialogue can take place between the bold gestures of speculative approaches and more situated, contextual, and cultural approaches.<sup>4</sup> Key to entering into this dialogue is a precise diagnosis of positions, the careful and rigorous practical exemplification of approaches, and the bravery to attempt work which stretches across and beyond boundaries. In the work of Brian Kane and François J. Bonnet we find crucial steps being made in all three of these areas.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In using this term Kane is perhaps grouping these 'Deleuzian' approaches more broadly under speculative realist approaches, including those of object-oriented philosophy (see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, eds. 2011). If so his later interest in the thought of Bruno Latour (Kane 2015, 12), a key source for object-oriented approaches, could again provide a useful bridge between the divergent strands of sound studies.

<sup>2</sup> As in the readings of Seth Kim-Cohen (2009, 126) and Christoph Cox (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Denning's (2015) exploration of early recorded music's development across colonial ports and its relation to decolonization provides an example of this kind of enquiry.

<sup>4</sup> For instance in the recent volume edited by Kolozova and Joy (2016).

## Notes on Contributor

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