

from *THE WIRE*, July 2001, OCR-ed by Dajuin Yao

Jacques Attali, author of *Noise* (1977). Speaking at the ICA, London, May 2001

At May's Cybersalon Net.Music conference in London, French political economist Jacques Attali declared that the Internet allows noise's war on music to continue by other means. Below is an edited transcript.

I wrote *Noise* in 1977, and still today I try to explain that it's impossible to look at music, or any other form of human endeavour, when you put it outside of the global context. Of course, music is very specific for a number of reasons. One economic reason is that music is pure information. In economics, information is a devil -- it's impossible to manage. For example, the whole of economic theory is the theory of scarce resources. If milk is freely available, then the price of milk is down; if milk is scarce, the price is up: this is economic theory. But it doesn't work for music; it doesn't work for information as a whole. If I have a pot of milk, and I give it to you, I don't have it anymore. But if I give you a piece of information I still have it, I keep it. Which means that if I have something and I give it to you, I create something new: abundance. And this means that economic theory doesn't work for information, when that information can be separated from its material support - a CD, or whatever is the case today.

When I have something that is scarce, its value is linked to the fact

that it is scarce, and that it belongs to me and nobody else. In an information economy, something has more value when a lot of people have it. For example, if I am the only one to have a telephone, it doesn't mean anything, not if there is no one else to call. If I am the only person to speak a particular language, its value is zero, because I cannot speak to anyone else. In info theory, the value of something increases with the number of people sharing it. It's why we must be very careful, when we speak about music, not to have in mind the main economic laws.

But there are also other reasons why we cannot rely on economics to understand music. Every human activity has a history, and it is a history that existed before economics, when things had a value that was not a price. So if you want to understand something's value, you must try to understand what its value was before it was given a price. This is true for everything. It is only when you have found what is the value, what is the role, what is the function of something before it had a price that you understand why it can be considered to have a value in economics, why it still has a value even today.

What is the value of music in precapitalist society? In my view, music is a metaphor for the management of violence. When people listen to music, they listen to the fact that society is possible: because we can manage violence. If violence is not managed, then society collapses. The only way for individuals to survive is for violence to be channelled or tamed. In anthropology, it can be explained that the best way to manage violence requires us to accept the two following hypotheses.

One: We are violent only when we have the same kinds of desire as the other person, and we become rivals. Two: The way to

manage violence in society is to organise differences - not inequalities - between people, in order that they do not desire the same thing, and through the channelling of violence by the creation of scapegoats. Scapegoats are a crucial element in the organisation of a society. They are somebody or something which must be hated, and also admired. Without them society is impossible, because violence is everywhere.

What's the relationship between that and music? If you look at music as a way of organising differences among noises, then you have music as a metaphor for the organising of scapegoats. Noise is violence, it is killing. Organising noises, creating differences in noises, is a way of demonstrating that violence can be transformed into a way of managing violence. And this is true everywhere. In thousands of myths there are relations between violence and noise; music and peace; musicians and scapegoats, music and relationship to gods; dance and religious ceremony. In every case they represent the same thing: trying to find a way to organise possible life in society.

Music is prophetic. Why? If we consider music to be a kind of code, we can see that there are many different ways of organising that code: different melodies, different rhythms, different genres. Moreover, we can explore these different forms of organisation much more easily, much more rapidly, than we can explore different ways of organising reality.

Music is just one element in the management of violence, and there are different stages in this. The first and longest stage in the history of mankind was through religion. We may say it began at least 15,000 years ago. Music didn't exist as an art - for art didn't exist. Music, dance, prayer, daily life were exactly the same;

everything was alive, everything had a spiritual dimension. In this world, music was an expression of God, as well as a way to speak God. It's what I call music linked to sacrifice ritual.

The Bible is the first sacred book in which music is said not to come from gods, but having been invented by men. It is presented as a human way of managing violence, and from Babylon to Egypt, the Greek and Roman and Chinese empires, we see the appropriation of 'sacred' or 'holy' powers by emperors, that is, by men. It is the beginning of division of labour, particularly between the three main powers - religion, the arts and the military - in which each plays a role in the management of violence. Music is beginning to become increasingly important in this management process, and remains so right through the Middle Ages.

The real change occurred when a new means of managing violence appears: money. There was another way of managing violence, and another way of managing violence through music. More people wanted to be part of society, so it became impossible to tame violence through the old model. Where an 'elite' form of music existed, it was in the courts, in the company of the king. But then a new group of money managers emerged in the form of the middle classes, the bourgeoisie, the shopkeepers. They wanted access to music but were too numerous and not in a position to finance musicians full time. Thus emerged the public performance. What's interesting is that not only does this begin to organise music economically - people would put on a concert and others would buy tickets - but that new styles and new instruments begin to have an aesthetic impact, such as the symphony and the sonata. This is what I see as a period characterised by representation. All this is linked to the fact that there is an increased number of patrons for whom the musician can work, but

also because music was being used as a representation of power. Patrons were there to show one another that they are the new elite, that they are powerful.

This developed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and then you have a whole new form of music appearing, linked to the need of developing a representational economy, leading not just to stars - individuals - but to large orchestras of 50 to 100 people... and ultimately the conductor. What is the conductor? He is someone who tames the orchestra, but also someone who is demonstrating to the audience that it is possible to tame the orchestra - we see one of us taming the workers, organising the division of labour, avoiding violence and creating harmony.

At the end of the 19th century, as the burgeoning middle classes began to consolidate their position within society, it was not enough for music to be confined to the concert hall - it had become impossible to give access to music to all those that wanted it. By the way, it is here that music begins to develop an economic value in the form of copyright. What is important to understand is that copyright is not property right. Copyright is given during the lifetime of the musician, and to some extent, that of their children - it's limited. This means that music has never been accepted as being the property of the musician. Copyright exists to finance his life, but not as property in itself, such as a car. So, to continue: at the end of the 19th century, it was necessary to create another way of organising music, in order to allow more people access to that music. It was time to invent the gramophone. The gramophone was needed because it was impossible to build enough concert houses for the hundreds of thousands of people who were in a position to buy music.

There was a need to create a means of having a private concert, because this was the only way to accommodate all those in a financial position to access music. Actually, there were two ways, which would go on to influence one another throughout the 20th century. Firstly, there was the gramophone - the concert without limit. And secondly there was radio, which would pose exactly the same problems as the Internet does today, in that it offered free music.

Thus began what I see as the third stage after ritual and representation - namely repetition, beginning at the end of the 19th century. What is interesting here is that music begins to be seen as something that can be stored, and then copied and copied and copied. The gramophone exists before television, before the car industry, before you have a society characterised by mass consumption. Once again, music was a prophecy, not only in the technological terms that facilitated the production of more music for more people, but also, once again, in terms of style. One of the first styles to emerge in this new era was jazz, which is itself predicated on repetition. And after that, of course, the whole 'scientific' or 'theoretical' approach to music, also characterised by repetition, that was taken by people like Stravinsky, Ravel, Boulez, Stockhausen, Reich and Glass. It was a way of reproducing stylistically what was happening technologically. Today, the music industry faces yet another problem, in that there are limits to the amount of music that they can sell to people. Why? Because there are physical limits to the amount of music that people can store at home, even if you miniaturise the sales format - CD, DVD, or whatever. It's simply too much, it takes too much space. There is an economic need to facilitate greater storage within a smaller physical space. What is required is a kind of 'virtual music'.

I think we may be entering a fourth era, one which will not replace repetition, just as repetition did not replace representation, and representation ritual. For instance, we still attend the types of concert that emerged during the representational period. There are a number of points to consider here. Firstly, when people talk about 'pirates', we should remember that the music industry is the biggest pirate of all, and has been from the very beginning. Who created the possibility of duplicating and distributing music, if not the record industry itself? You will find the same thing happening at each stage of the technology's evolutionary development - the record industry shoots itself in the foot. One arm is producing music and complaining that technology is making it easier to steal that music, while the other arm is producing the very technology that it claims to be damaging its interests. This was true for cassettes, this was true for CDs, and it is true again for the Internet. Napster is of marginal importance here. Gnutella or Aimster were born within the industry. Both came out of AOL and they escaped like a virus that escapes a laboratory. They try to prevent it, but they can't.

The second point to bear in mind is that we must make distinctions between three different types of copying. If I copy something for my own personal use, it is not illegal. Secondly, if I make a copy to give as a gift to another person, that too is not illegal, and this right is upheld across any number of formats, from CD to cassette to DVD. Interestingly, legislation exists that attempts to make it illegal, for the first time in mankind's history, for me to make such a gift over the Internet... which means that it will not work. The third type of copying, namely the mass duplication of music for sale or profit, is clearly illegal.

But there are roughly one billion MP3 files in circulation on the Internet, and this figure increases by around 100 million each month. The question is whether it is possible to tame this kind of thing, whether it is possible to put the genie back in the bottle. In answer to this, I propose three scenarios. Two scenarios see us remain in a repetitive era, in which we try to treat digital file formats as if they were physical commodities. In one of these, the majors win. They would have to rely on effective cryptography to prevent duplication of music; also necessary would be the destruction of all MP3 files or, at the very least, control over the production of the devices that play digital file formats. This is rather similar to the approach taken by the industry when trying to shift consumers from vinyl records to CD. So it is possible that the industry will begin to produce devices that are incompatible with the MP3 format. This is certainly the approach that the industry is taking at the moment, but to my mind this will not work. It would require legislative support, and it would need to be policed worldwide. It would have to install a system for monitoring email traffic on a global scale, to ensure that no MP3 files were being sent or received. Moreover, it would probably require the industry to control what kind of music was played in a live concert or rave party, or what have you. Most significantly, any monitoring system would inevitably be used not just to check for signs of illegal music, but for wider surveillance as well. My bet is that such a system will not work. But if it does, music will be a prophecy of nothing less than a future totalitarian society.

The second scenario is one in which the majors are not in a position to do it, but where artists will want to do it and will do it. Artists will say, 'I don't want to be rewarded only for selling the T-shirt' 'There will be a fight - Courtney Love is famous for that - but I think a lot of artists would fight against the majors and try to

organise the selling of their own music. I think this has a chance to work for the major artist, for the specialised artist, but this is not going to help the main global thing.

The third thing, which, of the three, I think has the best chance of succeeding, is what I would call the 'potlatch scenario', where people will exchange music just for the pleasure of actually giving. This is, of course, how MP3.com originally started, where people posted their music as amateurs, not as professionals. There are two directions in which this scenario could develop. Firstly, if repetition proves to be enough to tame music, we might witness the emergence of what has been called 'cultural capitalism'. And as I have said, information does not conform to normal economic rules that rely on scarcity.

But technology can be used to create artificial scarcity, so that cultural goods can be bought and sold like any other commodity. At the same time, one way of utilising actual scarcity might be to maintain a focus on live entertainment. If I look at the final of a soccer world championship, it is an entirely different experience to watch it live than it is to watch it two hours later, when you already know the result. You don't need any technology in order to be able to sell a live event, because the value lies in the fact that you absolutely cannot know how it will end. A live concert in many ways is not a live event, because you have an idea of what is going to happen - unless it is totally improvised. So we can imagine cultural capitalism emphasising live events which are either totally improvised, or for which a conclusion cannot be forecast.

However, if I am correct when I say that repetition will not be enough to tame music in the future, a fourth stage in the evolution

of music may emerge, which I call 'composition'. The future is no longer to listen to music, but to play it. It is different from everything that I have mentioned before. As a theorist, I have to say that composition would be done first and foremost for ourselves, for each of us, for the simple pleasure of making music. This is significant not only because you do it outside of the economy, for your own personal enjoyment, but because the only person listening to the piece is the same person playing it. It lies primarily outside of communication. And, stylistically, this is important because, as any musician will tell you, what we like to play is often not the same as what we like to listen to.

The tools of composition will be tools that are linked to the body: prostheses. Certainly we can use sexual metaphors here: the first characteristic of composition would be masturbatory. Of course, this would be just one element of the compositional act, followed closely by the need to share with another. It says in the Bible: 'You should love others as you do yourself.' I have always understood this to mean that it is impossible to like others if you don't like yourself first. Of course, the market economy may try to distort composition, to reorganise it in its own image. For example, I am fascinated by the recent work of Paul Allen. As a fan of Jimi Hendrix, he has created a museum in Seattle in which you can simulate the sensation of appearing as Jimi Hendrix live on stage, complete with applause at the end. I am sure this is going to develop as a kind of market-led recreation of composition, where you will simulate being an artist with a simulated audience. Nevertheless, the real pleasure of composition would exist outside of the market economy, just for the fun of it, where violence is rechannelled through creation. For when I create something, and I then give it to you, I may have a chance of living in your memory forever.

Transcript by Niki Gomez. A completely revised edition of *Noise* has just been republished in French by Fayard. Jacques Attali's Website is at www.attali.com. An online archive of the Cybersalon conference, with audio files of the other talks, is at www.cybersalon.org