Speechsong
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What Schoenberg was seeking to do in his work was to expand the soundscape beyond traditional notions of what “music” was, an insight that Cage understood intuitively and to which he devoted his career. In arguing that the sonic environment, or soundscape, constituted a form of music, Cage was harkening to the insights of the Futurist artist Luigi Russolo’s *L’arte dei rumori*, and if it appears difficult to draw a direct line between Russolo and Schoenberg, one can do so indirectly via Schoenberg’s mentor Gustav Mahler. 1 Russolo’s *L’arte dei rumori*, the manifesto launched in 1913 and published in the midst of WW1, opens with the observation that, whereas in the past, music was attributed to the gods (and hence its role in religious rites), “today, noise

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1 Russolo’s treatise had been preceded by Ferruccio Busoni’s 1907 *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* (translated in 1911 by T. Baker for Schirmer of New York), in which Busoni (who was one of Schoenberg’s correspondents) entertains the possibility of electronic music: “I refer to an invention by Dr. Thaddeus Cahill. He has constructed a comprehensive apparatus which makes it possible to transform an electric current into a fixed and mathematically exact number of vibrations. As pitch depends on the number of vibrations, and the apparatus may be ‘set’ on any number desired, the infinite gradation of the octave may be accomplished by merely moving a lever corresponding to the pointer of a quadrant” (33).
triumphs over and dominates our sensibilities.”

By “noise,” Russolo means an irregular set of vibrations, be it temporally or in terms of intensity; by “sound,” he refers to a regular succession of vibrations. Polyphonic music was based on the notion that music developed in time; harmony did not exist in the sense that the various parts of the musical work were subordinate to it. The idea of music, thus, was horizontal, not vertical. The desire for harmony developed gradually, passing from music with little dissonance “to the complicated and persistent dissonances that characterize contemporary music [alle complicate e persistenti dissonanze che caratterizzano la musica contemporanea].” This evolution of music, Russolo argues, derives from the increasing proliferation of machines. Its implications are seen, for example, in the increasing size of orchestras, where the goal is to increase the sound produced; the artistic motivation, in other words, is not strictly musical. Given the overriding presence of noise in contemporary culture, music must “conquer the infinite variety of sound-noise [suono rumore],” which in a large city includes the rush of gas in metallic tubes, the mumbling of motors, the screeching of brakes, the din of subways, and the sounds associated with modern warfare. In a statement that Cage will echo, Russolo writes that “every manifestation of our life is accompanied by noise.” Even language contains noise, represented by consonants; sound is associated with vowels.

The art of noise does not seek to limit itself to imitations of environmental sounds; rather, it is produced by a new set of instruments called intonarumori (noisemakers). Russolo notes that the division of the octave into 12 equal tones imposed a considerable limitation on the number of sounds that could be

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3 Ibid., 10.
4 Ibid., 11.
5 Ibid., 12.
6 Ibid., 14.
7 Ibid., 52.
Glenn Gould and Arnold Schoenberg produced musically, a notion that Cage would fully take up with 4’ 33”.

Russolo remarks that the tempered harmonic system can be compared to a system of painting that abolished all the infinite gradations that the seven colors are able to provide: [...] one yellow, one green, one red, etc. [...] Temperament with its homophony has in a certain way disconnected the notes, having taken from them the most delicate ties that can unite them and that represent fractions of tones smaller than even semitones.8

While this theory of noise may appear to be unacceptable to many, Russolo states, the history of music consistently reminds us that change is the essence of that history:

Who is surprised any longer by the famous harmonic dissonance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony? [...] Who thinks to say any longer that the music of Wagner hurts the ears? And the most recent dissonances of Debussy and of Strauss, have they not become logical and normal for our ears?9

Russolo goes on to argue that “it wouldn’t be possible for music to evolve so decisively towards dissonance if our ears had not been used to the sonic complexities of modern life.”10

What is crucial to note in Russolo’s tract is that dissonance is accompanied by an extension of the soundscape, expanding, thus, the musical domain. Schoenberg confronted this extension via the influence of Gustav Mahler, who was composing music in Vienna at a time when it had the reputation of “the world’s leading center for Jewish liturgical music.”11 Uri Caine’s

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8 Ibid., 60.
9 Ibid., 89.
10 Ibid., 90.
album *Urlicht/Primal Light*,\(^{12}\) brings out the connections brilliantly. As Caine has stated in an interview,

I had read a story about Mahler, in the Henry-Louis de la Grange biography, about how he was conducting in Prague and met a great singer at the opera. Turned out the guy was a cantor [musical leader of a synagogue] and not a professional singer. So they spent an afternoon together, where, in a way, the cantor was trying to persuade Mahler to return to Judaism, because Mahler had had to convert [from Judaism to Catholicism at age 37, to secure a court appointment], and Mahler was sort of defending himself. And when he listened to the cantor’s music, he was crying, he was moved. … The [melody of] the opening of ‘The Farewell,’ which Mahler wrote at the end of his life as one of the pieces in *The Song of the Earth (Das Lied von der Erde)* I had heard at a Jewish funeral, in the *Prayer for the Dead*. So [in ‘Mahler: Reimagined’] we’re having a cantor, Don Gurney, from L.A. He sings that prayer, and we improvise around it, and then we play Mahler.\(^{13}\)

Franz Winter states in the liner notes to the CD that,

[o]n the cusp of a new era, [Mahler’s] music is the Janus-like embodiment of the crisis in sound. He is collector, preserver and destroyer. In the shadow of Wagner, in the fading aura of Bruckner, it is he who once more strives to restore expressive grandeur to music. And he interweaves and instills it with all imaginable trivial sounds of his time: with marches, dance

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music, folk music, with cowbells and sleigh bells, with rattles and mallets.\textsuperscript{14}

Schoenberg did something similar with the “klezmer-ish touches” in his orchestration of Brahms’s \textit{G Minor Quartet},\textsuperscript{15} but, more significantly, he wanted to do this from within the musical system, his profound insight being that such difference was always already an intrinsic part of the musical environment.

\textsuperscript{14} Franz Winter, “Gustave Mahler (1860–1911),” liner notes, Gustav Mahler/Uri Caine, \textit{Urlicht/Primal Light.}
