Noise: The Political Economy of Music
by Jacques Attali
Minneapolis: The University of
Minnesota Press, 1985
First published in France in 1977,
Noise is available for the first time in
English as part of the University of
Minnesota Press series, Theory and
History of Literature, a collection of
writings pertinent to current literary
and cultural criticism.

As a professor of economic theory
at the University of Paris, and a special
consultant to President François
Mitterrand, Attali's approach
immediately diverges from
critical theory's insistence that music be
understood as simply "reflecting" or
following in the wake of social
development. In positing
the opposite, Attali brings fresh
insights to a critical analysis
of music's social role.

His theoretical and philosophical
divagations commence with the noises
which have constantly accompanied our
work and play; the chaos this random
orchestration provides is an
understanding of our social nature and
the relationship of noise to the exercise
of power.

Music is essentially a herald, indicative
of approaching changes in the social
forces of production. It has arisen out of
historical attempts to shape
the natural and social sounds which have
been humanity's collective experience
of the world. In delineating
the development of the political
economy of music as four codes or
"networks," that of sacrifice,
representation, repetition and
composition, Attali confirms this
function. His networks can be seen as
modes of distribution in which the
social role of music serves as both
social integrator and also as harbinger
of subversion. Music has always had a
twin element inherent to its character
and Attali's argument does not overlook
this.

The author succeeds in examining each
of these successive stages from the
standpoint of music's relationship to
changing political economies, providing
a commentary that moves between
historical detail—the jongleurs, position
in French society, their evolution into
the musiciens with the development of
capitalism—and his own metamorphic
melange of post-structuralist discourses.

The point of departure for Attali's
thesis, the framework through which the
networks of musical distribution are
discussed and assessed, is contained in
a meditation on Brahegg's great
painting "Carnival with Lant;" the
images, the conflicts with polarities
depicted here, and the author's
interpretations of a "juggler" Carnival and a
"capitalist" Lant, in fact serve as
a mediation through which the
changing character of music's
relationship to the politico-economic
application of power is examined.

Brahegg's painting as a tableau for our
apprehension of a changing political
economy of music is, mostly, daringly
effective. Occasionally it is, as well,
exceedingly oblique.

In the sacrificial stage, music was
heard in all places of labour and was a
daily feature of life. Crucially,
however, music had a ritual aspect
which led to its operation as a
simulacrum of the ritual sacrifice of a
scapegoat. Attali's accounting clearly
demonstrates that music's role as a
social integrator was the reconciliation
of people to social order and, equally, to
erasure memory, to make people forget
the general violence with which they
were surrounded. Simultaneously, it
served to stir revolt, fuel passion and
subversion, in the expression of the
festival spirit signifying humanity's
freedom.

A conflict between two social orders—
carnival and Lent, festival and
Austerity, two relations to power—is
revealed through Attali's rendering of
Brahegg's masterpiece.

"But Brahegg, in his meditation on the
possible forms of noise, could not
have failed to hear how they hing on
systems of power. He thus outlined
everything it was possible to outline; he
showed that we must not read into the
painting a meaning of history; that we
must use it instead to listen to music,
which creates a ritual order, then is
represented as a simulacrum of order,
finally passes over to the side of Lent
and is sold like fish, compulsory
nourishment (p.23)."

In the stage of "representation," music
has become spectacle, attended at
specific places. While in the earlier,
sacrificial stage it did not generate
wealth, here the musicians have become
producers, enrolled in a division of
labour. In this period the monarchy's
exclusive possession of musical
performances at court was eventually
superseded by the rise of a merchant
bourgeoisie, which purchased outright
the performing rights of the musicians.

Musician ceased to be itinerant
performers in village festivals to
become the man-servants of royalty;
their no longer performed
exclusively for their lord and master but
for many clients, who now purchased a
non-exclusive commodity. As
representation, music served to enforce
belief in the order and harmony newly
established by mercantile power.

Attali's stages in the history of music's
political economy, it should be
noted, are not presented as fixed,
immutable categories on vigil as new
dogmas of musicalcogano can. The
overlapping nature of these networks is
such that the uneven development of
music's distribution becomes a
succession of "orders," each violated by
noises prophetic of a nascent order
carried within the old. This analysis is
always a refreshing break from the
formalistic theories and notions of
genre—these inevitably divorced from
the social and political realities behind
them.

The advent of the ability to record
sound, the repetition of the object in
mass production, eclipsed music's
representational function from within.

This stage of "replication" encompasses
our own era. It contains some of the
more trenchant observations on music's
position in a technocratic capitalism to
have been advanced in some time
(excepting select few writings on the
social role of music in commodity
culture by British music critic, Simon
Frith).

Attali states that changes in musical
production announced in the process of
replication constitute a whole new
political economy, a significant
"mutations" of man's relationship to
history. Quite accurately, the main
efforts of production are seen as no
longer inherent to the creation of an
object, but as occurring outside it,
existing chiefly in the creation and
recreation of a demand for the replica.
In Attali's framework this is a herald of
aomy, of non-differentiation, and
finally of death.

"For death, more generally, is present in
the very structure of the repetitive
economy: the stockpiling of use-value in
the commodity object is fundamentally
a herald of death. In effect, transforming
use-value into a stockpileable object
makes it possible to sell and stockpile
rights to usage without actually using
anything, to exchange ad infinitum
without extracting pleasure from the
object, without experiencing its
function (p.126)."

The author's final stage of development,
"composition," is meant to demonstrate
the situation of the commodity culture
fundamentally a herald of death. In effect,
transforming use-value into a stockpileable
object makes it possible to sell and stockpile
rights to usage without actually using
anything, to exchange ad infinitum
without extracting pleasure from the
object, without experiencing its
function (p.126)."

The author's final stage of development,
"composition," is meant to demonstrate
future possibilities inherent within the
subversive element always present in
music—the emancipator side which is
presently being silenced in the
anonymity of commodity culture's
repetitive circus. Composition concerns
our potential ability to compose music
that is a response to this enforced
silence, an entry into communication
and political practice.
"Today, in embryonic form, beyond resolution, lies the potential of new music, a fourth kind of musical practice. It heralds the arrival of new social relations. Music is becoming composition (p.20)."

This brief, final chapter sheds much light on one of Artail's introductory assertions that "this book is not theorizing about music, but through music." Following well-documented historical observations and penetrating analyses of music's role in our epoch, his stage of composition has all the romantic idealism of a retrospective attempt to re-establish an age of lost innocence. Is Jacques Artail, born in 1943, still enthralled by the "unfinished dream" of the 60's?

This is not a mere anti-sixties slam. Except for some comments on jazz, Artail at no point shows any indication that the popular music of the post-sixties period is anything but the natural outcome of the age of repetition. Repetitive and meaninglessness.

"Jimmy" (some things are always lost in translation, lacks freedom, etc. all serve as exemplars of an era when the compositional or subversive element in music was at its height.

While that historical period may be much of what Artail claims for it, the relationship of politics to music (a political awareness and response to the commodification of music) has undergone considerable positive change in the intervening twenty years. Today--in Third World musical influences, critical voices from punk to rap, musicians' responses to political issues from apartheid to the elimination of farmhand by Agri-business--the compositional nature of music is finding expression in areas Artail disregards or views as mere noise, providing further demonstration that the imposed silence of the well-placed machinery of repetition is indeed doing its job well.

Throughout the book, Artail's prose is often a mix of apostrophiic rhetoric combined with metaphoric flourishes. This text coding is accomplished in an eclectic post-modern style, which transforms theory from brittle polemics to an associative exercise in establishing connections between one set of provocative ideas and another. As earlier stated, this makes for fascinating but always difficult reading. Paralleling the thesis on music's twin role as social integrator and subverter, Artail's language also operates on two. Often where his analysis calls for precision, apostrophus polarities are substituted, reducing much of the thrust of his argument to the isothermal utopian postulates.

The final chapter raises a necessary, evaluative question: has this entire book all been "noise signifying nothing?" Well not quite. Despite its tendency to impede toward the end, Artail's work stands out as an adventure some analysis of the political economy of music. Its challenge to calculated critical thinking is undeniable. It can only revitalize discussion on the connections between political power, ideology and the role of music in the current cybernetic phase of capitalism's twilight years.

It is out of such explorations as Artail's that the collective freedom to compose may gain a stronger political articulation.

James Dennis Corcoran is working on a book about the jazz scene in Toronto in the 1950s.

CANADIAN BROADCASTING: A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY (18.00 PER CDPP)

Designed as a tool for those interested in the present and post debates on Canadian broadcasting policy, the bibliography comprises English language writings on the Canadian broadcasting system. It includes books, magazine articles and scholarly texts, as well as government documents on the technological and the cultural aspects of broadcasting. Over 500 entries are included, organized into 50 major keyword areas, as well as an alphabetical author index.

MEDIA, PEACE AND SECURITY: A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY (18.00 PER CDPP)

This bibliography is designed to serve the investigation of the relationship between the work of the news media and the dissemination of information, peace and security as public affairs, political problems and social causes. The data base in this bibliography is selected to help the reader understand the industrial structures of the news media, their reliance on the reporting of major issues, and the dominant ways in which information, peace and security issues are portrayed by the media. Some 500 titles are catalogued in this bibliography, including books, magazine articles, scholarly works and conference papers.

ARMS CONTROL AND THE MEDIA (18.00 PER CDPP)

The discussion of how the media covers issues of arms control, disarmament and security has to be "located within" (an essay) statements and political and ideological judgements. This text provides the empirical data acquired through a comparative study undertaken by the Centre over a three-month period to examine coverage of security issues, superpower, arms negotiations, and the arms control treaty, in 16 English dailies across Canada.

Each section starts with a brief time line of the issues as they were reported, followed by a more detailed chronology, also including key quantitative data regarding the distribution, placement and extent of the coverage. The analysis of main story actors, institutional sources, and dominant themes concludes the presentation of findings.

To place order, please write to:

THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY
CARLETON UNIVERSITY
OTTAWA, ONTARIO
K1H 8W9

59