Joanna Demers. 2010. *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Nick Collins and Julio d'Escriván. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by Marilou Polymeropoulou

"Electronic music is the mainstream," begin Nick Collins and Julio d'Escriván in the *Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music (CCTEM)*, referring to the impact of electronic music and technology on twentieth– and twenty-first century music making (1). The editors of the volume synthesize a history of electronic music based on perspectives by composers and scholars from a variety of disciplines, including communication studies, musicology, visual arts, music technology, psychology of music, and computer science. "In some quarters of academia, aesthetics is a dirty word," asserts Demers. Meanwhile, in *Listening Through the Noise*, Joanna Demers presents an aesthetic theory of experimental electronic music accompanied by audio examples which can be found online at the Oxford University Press website. Both books define electronic music as organized sounds generated by electronic circuits, which may be part of musical instruments, computers, or any electronic equipment (Collins and d'Escriván 256; Demers 5). The *CCTEM* serves as a more historically-focused account—an introduction to the field that mainly addresses student readers—while *Listening Through the Noise* provides a philosophical approach that requires some background knowledge in aesthetic theory, as well as familiarity with history and sound of the music itself.

The *Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music* primarily serves three purposes: a) delivering a concise but not conventional history of electronic music; b) bridging the rivalry between electroacoustic and electronica music, which are classified as "academic serious art" and "pop" music, respectively, and c) envisaging a cultural perspective by including artists' thoughts on electronic music. The volume is divided into three sections, and while each maintains a specific interest in history, practices, and foundations of electronic music, the reader will find much overlap between them. Some of the chapters analyze specific themes, such live performances (chapter three), algorithmic composition (chapter six), live audiovisuals (chapter seven), and the psychology of electronic music (chapter twelve); others present

an overview of significant moments in electronic music history. In chapter one, Andrew Hugill introduces the origins of electronic music as a result of creative imagination, whilst Ge Wang, in chapter four, writes a history of programming and music, from the analog to the digital age, and early computer languages (e.g., MUSIC, CSOUND, Max/MSP, SuperCollider, ChucK, and custom computer programs). One of the most significant arguments that the editors underline is the changes in music making caused by the impact of other media technologies on music; they find that contemporary artists incorporate a variety of compositional techniques as a result of the influence, exhibiting productive crossovers between media and arts. d'Escriván discusses this argument extensively in chapter nine, on the relationship of electronic music and the moving image (e.g., films, TV, and video games).

The *CCTEM* contains a strong methodological connection to Demers's monograph. Electronic music has been divided into two aesthetic categories, one referring to academic serious art, and the other—usually regarded as the lesser, "low art" one—to popular music. These quite distinct categories, supported by "ivory-tower professors who spout theories about the good and the beautiful without having had much contact with either" (Demers 2010:1), reflected an approach shared in the past by the majority of the avant-garde artists, once characterized as elitist. Collins and d'Escriván, however, attempt to "reconcile the electroacoustic and electronica worlds" (4), showing that there has been a significant change, primarily attributed to the development of commodified and affordable music technologies (3). The *CCTEM* represents electronic music as a whole, rather than from a "high art" perspective, as well as the impact of electronic technology through analyses of its practical uses—for example, on DJ culture (50) or on popular music making (64, 122), but also through the cited statements of artists from different musical traditions (72-86, 185-199). In this fashion, Margaret Schedel, in chapter two, based on interviews with electroacoustic musicians of different musical and social backgrounds (24), explores the relationship between electronic music and the studio—especially the home studio—as an important place to compose, listen, reproduce, reflect, communicate, perform, and socialize. Schedel also underlines an interesting point made by J. Anthony Allen, suggesting that young composers who think positively about electronica will have the power to change the restrictive definition of academic electronic music (31). In chapter three, Nicolas Collins (the American composer, not the editor of the volume) explores the forms of live electronic music by analyzing examples (e.g., John Cage's work, tape music, computer music, and also the latest stream in hardware hacking and circuit bending) as a means of music making.

The *CCTEM* is successful at incorporating artists' statements into the main text, rather than as an appendix, which serves to underline the importance of their discourse and experiences to electronic music, presenting it as a current, contemporary genre with a concrete historical background. Laurie Spiegel, Yasunao Tone, Pauline Oliveros, Mira Calix, Max Matthews, Bubblyfish, Barry Truax, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and George Lewis are a few of the artists whose voices, in the form of statements, provide critical insight into electronic music here. Also, the *CCTEM* compiles a chronology of electronic music dating from Pythagoras to "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Legend," a 2006 video game that featured adaptive audio techniques.

Collins and d'Escriván's point is to write a history of electronic music where a sense of aesthetics is implied but not overtly discussed; Demers provides the opposite approach, as her book structures an aesthetic theory by referencing the history of electronic music. As a musicologist who has previously written on sampling in hip-hop (2002) and the impact of intellectual property law on musical creativity (2006), Demers focuses her present work on experimental electronic music making. She attempts to bridge the methodological gap between the various disciplinary perspectives that have been used to analyze electronic music, and with all the complexity that such a cross-disciplinary monograph holds, she makes a crucial and favorable step.

Listening Through the Noise is also divided into three parts "according to three discernible conceptions of the meaningfulness of sound: sign, object, and situation" (13). The author assumes a general familiarity with semiotics, hermeneutics, and aesthetics, and a reader without these backgrounds would find little sense in the organization of her chapters, or how they connect, or in the analogies used to answer the primary questions. The book presents case studies of specific genres: post-Schaefferian electroacoustic music (chapter one); electronica (chapter two); microsound (chapter three); drone music, dub techno, and noise (chapter four); ambient, soundscape, and field recordings (chapter five). Chapter six concludes with a general discussion on genre, experimentalism and the musical frame.

Influenced by philosophical approaches to music by scholars such as Scruton (1997), Danto (1997), and Kivy (2002), Demers succeeds in delivering an aesthetic history of electronic music that addresses the ways composers perceive electronic music making. By citing artists' statements in her narrative, as did Collins and d'Escriván, she categorizes her genre case studies upon a variety of topics, such as the theories of listening and the phenomenological approach of music (post-Schaefferian music [21]), but also the methods of sound construction in electronica and electroacoustic music (48).

Demers aims to understand electronic music as a whole by analyzing the plurality of discourses by artists, music critics, philosophy scholars, musicologists, and lay participants. At times, this dubious task requires more analysis. Take chapter four, which focuses on the sublime in art as experienced through noise (105-106). She looks at the analogy between bondage/discipline and noise (in which she refers to Merzbow's work) and the concept of noise as a form of pain by which one can achieve pleasure/catharsis. This connection could be further explained, as it is a strong argument related to the enjoyment of noise through embodiment of sounds.

The strongest point of the book is Demers's development of a theory of aesthetic listening, in which she argues that "listening to electronic music constitutes an act that is fundamentally different from how listeners have been used to hearing Western art music for the previous five centuries" (15). This line of reasoning extends a statement that has been already made in Cornelia Fales's piece on the perception of space in ambient and techno musics in *Wired for Sound* (2005, not referenced by Demers). She carefully articulates the discourse between high-art and mass-culture electronic music, rather than a monolithic, elitist approach that has been assumed by Adornean lineage of aesthetic theories. Furthermore, she provides a definition of experimental music that adopts an ethnomusicological perspective, defining experimental as, "anything that has departed significantly from norms of the time, but with the understanding that something experimental in 1985 could have inspired what was conventional by 1990" (7), underlining the need for genre definitions to be re-examined according to the norms of each era in which they are presented. In chapter six, Demers introduces the idea of "metagenre," the category that is formed by "genre mash ups." According to Demers, one genre actually incorporates multiple genres, (e.g., electronica includes techno, house, and other variations, [171]). One might have expected the writer to share some of Fabian Holt's observations from *Genre in Popular Music* (2007), especially because the categorization of jazz and other American genres of popular music that Holt analyzes seem as equally problematic as electronic music to define, but such connections are absent here.

Taken together, the *Listening Through the Noise* and the *CCTEM* can be used to understand many different approaches, problems, questions, and aims regarding electronic music in a social, cultural, and historical context, while also addressing its standing point in music. Separately, Demers's book serves as a point for advancing the dialogue between music and philosophy, and the *CCTEM* as an important work for revealing the plurality of perspectives on electronic music throughout its history.

References

Danto, Arthur. 1997. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Demers, Joanna. 2002. *Sampling as Lineage in Hip-Hop*. PhD diss., Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

Demers, Joanna. 2006. *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Holt, Fabian. 2007. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Fales, Cornelia. 2005. "Short Circuiting Perceptual Systems: Timbre in Ambient and Techno Music" in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*. Greene, Paul D. and Thomas Porcello, eds. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Kivy, Peter. 2002. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scruton, Roger. 1997. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.