

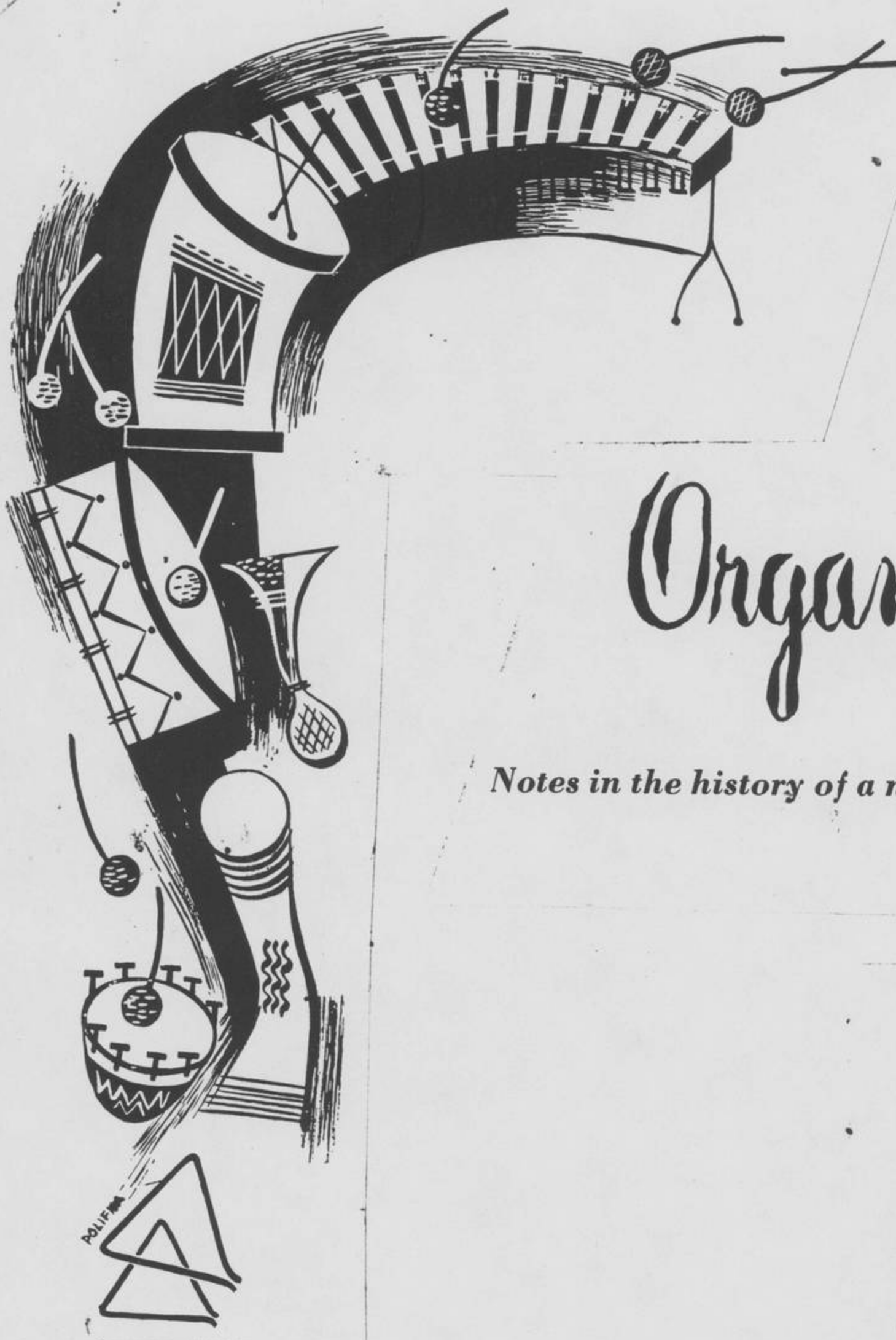
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Organized Sound

Notes in the history of a new disagreement: between sound and tone

by Peter Yates



LIGI RUSSOLO, an Italian painter, no composer, between 1912 and 1925 gave concerts, constructed "noise-tuners," published *The Art of Noise*. Edgar Varèse, who now lives in the environs of Hollywood, introduced Russolo at the latter's concert in Paris in the 20's. Varese criticized Russolo's work as being too concerned with imitation of natural and city sounds. Russolo's three compositions were called *Spirals of Noise: Dining on the Hotel Terrace, Awakening of the City, Assembling of Automobiles and Aeroplanes*.

Gradually more and more importance was being given to the percussion section in new symphonic works by Stravinsky and others. Milhaud's *Orestiad* contained one entire section set for choric speech and percussion; his opera, *Christophe Colomb*, contained many sections for speech and percussion. In 1931 appeared the logical outcome of so much indirect preparation, *Ionization*, by Edgar Varèse, written for percussion alone, differing in intent from Russolo's work by being in no way an imitation of natural or city sounds but instead an expressive organization of sound as opposed to tone. With this work Varèse announced the new disagreement: between sound and tone. Musical disagreement had previously been between consonance and dissonance.

Neither Varèse's work nor Russolo's work had been concerned with a revival of primitive instruments; although certain primitive instruments were used by them as a temporary means. Russolo's idea was a definite result of an interest in the machine. He desired to carry his work forward with the aid of electrical means. This required financial support which he was unable to obtain. An interest in the possibilities the machine offers was shown by other composers. George Antheil eliminated the performer by stamping holes directly in the rolls of player-pianos; Ernest Toch, now also living in the neighborhood of Los Angeles, wrote for speech to be recorded nine times as fast as spoken. Lopatnikoff, a pupil of Toch, made experiments with music for records. John Cage, a Southern Californian recently engaged for the second time by Mills College in Oakland to give courses in the organization of new sound materials, has written an *Imaginary Landscape* for percussion, using also recordings of constant and variable frequency sound made by laboratory methods for physical testing purposes.

Some composers, who were likewise musicologists interested in primitive, folk, and oriental music, also used percussion instruments, usually in a manner suggestive of the past.

As Russolo had suggested, there were many possibilities offered by the use of electricity. Inventors had been inventing electrical musical instruments—Theremin, Trautwein. Hindemith wrote music for the Trautonium which could as well have been played on regular symphonic in-

struments. The Theremin supplemented the cellos in the Philadelphia Symphony. Theremin virtuosos quickly wore out the "no hands" sensation in a welter of indecisive tones. But composers and critics soon saw that the new electrical instruments had one thing in common with the

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percussion and mechanical, and that was a new common interest in exploring the field of sound and rhythm, bringing into availability new musical materials. New materials suggest new possibilities. Leopold Stokowski in several popular articles gave these possibilities wider circulation. The goal began to be clear to assemble an instrument which would make the entire field of sound available for musical purposes—any desirable frequency, amplitude, overtone structure and duration. Pieces of the new instrument, practical, technical equipment, lay all over the place waiting for the incentive and the initiative that would assemble them.

Radio and film equipment to produce sound effects is a commercial exploitation of the field that interested Russolo. The difference is that radio and film companies use the materials representatively, whereas Russolo wanted to organize them for "Futurist Noise." One author suggested that through the acquisition of a library of templates, that is to say, a film library of sound effects, the most practical exploitation of sound may be made. Douglas Shearer, MGM sound engineer, agrees. John Cage believes that film will make noise available for musical purposes and that electrical means will make it available for musical purposes.

None of these workers are concerned first of all with either prettiness or ugliness; they are not concerned with the science of harmony. Some of them are concerned with deeper meaning. Varèse surely is. There's a lot of deeper meaning in just plain experimentation. None of them consider the raw materials they use as music; they do consider what they make out of the materials to be music, however. Lots of people, hearing this music, have liked it, have even considered some of it pretty. Compositions reheard gather meaning as stones gather moss.

Writing about his own development John Cage says: "I had written a lot of dissonant linear music. I studied counterpoint, form, and analysis with Schoenberg. I saw the New Music publications of Percussion Music, heard it called nonsense, doubted whether it was nonsense. I saw some abstract films made by Oscar Fischinger, talked with him and began the writing of my first Quartet for percussion. I organized the composition on a rhythmic basis, indicating no instruments. Friends helped me perform it on kitchen utensils, pieces of wood, tire rims, brake drums, etc. I was unaware at the time that I was doing what many negro street musicians in New Orleans had done. I was sharing points of view of Schoenberg and hot jazz combined. I gave (Continued on page 42)

private performances of the results and everyone encouraged going ahead. I rationalized the whole thing with reference to the overtone series, that is, I said our ears are in one of the high octaves where we are able to compose and hear music without reference to a fundamental tone underlying the entire composition. I defined music for myself as Organized Sound, and I still define it that way.

Later, in the amplification of small sounds I found that delicate differences of amplitude were brought about through the use of electrical amplification, and that marvellous experiences in the field of new timbres existed all about us: cellophane crumpled in front of a microphone and unlimited other possibilities. I presented December 9, 1938, a concert of percussion music in Seattle, the first complete concert of this kind in America. People received it with enthusiasm, and many volunteered to play. I invited the composition of scores, and the literature of percussion music grew from three or four compositions in 1934 to about fifty compositions at present. I continued giving concerts, and the interest continued to grow. I gave a concert at Mills College in the summer of 1939 under the auspices of the Bennington School. Mills College asked for a second percussion concert. I had meanwhile become aware of the background of my work and was interested to establish a center of experimental music which would continue the work done with percussion instruments and add the use of mechanical and electrical means for further exploration of the field of sound and rhythm. Function: research, composition, performance. I am now back at Mills. Looks now as though I have the job of applying this work to the field of recreation, which is good."

So today in the midst of us in California is being written a new technological and meaningful chapter in the history of the creative organization of sound, out of which comes music.

Not long after the 1941 publication of this article in *Arts & Architecture*, Leopold Stokowski's popularization book, *Music For All of Us*, was published. He has a few comments on possibilities, some of which had to wait for today's avant-gardists.

If only Author Peter Yates could have lived to see—and hear!—the events at University of California San Diego (La Jolla) May 1979, and at Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in July & August 1979.