

The Illusion of Pure Music by Freida Abtan (August 18th, 2010)

I find myself listening to music now interwoven with the world around me. I mean, it's normal to be listening to music and to hear sounds from your environment at the same time, but usually as listeners we mentally keep these things separate. The music stays 'pure', so to speak, or 'same' in our brains. People talk like this is true all the time. They do it even when they are discussing difference. If you say something sounds better on vinyl, you are making an allusion to this 'pure' music that you can discern through different playback conditions, even if those conditions color it. You are essentially saying that you know what part of what you are hearing is the music itself, which you could recognize in another format, and what part of what you are hearing comes from the format.

I think for most of us there is this illusion of some kind of exact transfer function between recorded sound and its perception when we are listening it. Actually, sound engineers and serious audiophiles know that this isn't true. What's strange is that they also tend to maintain the illusion of 'pure' music even while they don't believe in 'pure' sound. For them, the room a sound is played in, the listening and playback conditions recreate a sound so completely according to their specifications that the 'original' is lost. And this is true. I mean space and technology and time and device are integral to sound reproduction. But still, this discussion of sound privileges source. It is focused on the reproduction of 'music' within, but still apart from, its 'environment'. There is still this idea of the music keeping its form in relation to whatever else might be going on. So, even people who are aware of the effect of different listening conditions on sound, have this idea of music existing without interference from the world around it, even though the world around it shapes the sound the music is made by.

The way that I've been listening to music lately encourages the outside world to be a creative part of what's going on. Today I was listening to Lali Puna really quietly during a rainstorm that would swell and thin according to its own rhythms. I especially liked how in combination, the vocal mids gave themselves over to a staccato build-up of white noise, how the sweeping textural gestures I was listening to (which if I think about it, were probably caused by the outside cars driving past) divided the bass and drums into interesting sections. I know that a lot of artists spend time working with this kind of focused, environmental, listening, but my purpose here isn't really to take stock of this practice, or even of the way it influences my perception, but instead to enjoy the new music it gives me: the music that is created by the intersection of sound waves in this unique moment of time and place. It can't help but put me in a great mood every time. Music is always so new.