# For the Birds

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The passage that received my heaviest underscoring in Allen S. Weiss's newest book, *Varieties of Audio Mimesis: Musical Evocations of Landscape* (Errant Bodies Press, 2008), goes as follows:

> The fact that all recorded music is necessarily a construction implies that technological means of representation transform the ontology of the real, and that this ontology is constituted by numerous representational layers, related not only by correspondence but also by contradiction. What appears as real is always a palimpsest of effects and forms, of causes and effects, a dense web of significations well beyond conscious expectations and predictions. (50)

Thus is summed up a crucial aspect of this book, which does great work in haranguing some rather evasive concepts. Many musicians and phonographers will tell you that a prime objective in performance is to eliminate discernable indications (perhaps specifically, limitations) of the materials used to render music and recordings, ensuring an "unmediated" artifact. For instance, a recording of a clarinet reproduces the sounds of the musical notes produced by the clarinet, but most often eliminates the sound of anyone pressing the keys of the clarinet itself. Or, in a field recording, levels are adjusted to ensure the microphone noise is not louder than the quietest environmental sounds. In this largely modern paradigm, recordings and performance styles are structured so as to be interpreted as originary or self-producing sound events, thus purposely minimizing the qualities that reveal them as reproductions. From the way musicians handle instruments, to the notes they play, to the manner in which sounds are recorded and mixed, every aspect of the recording is most often meant to play down or eliminate any suggestion of mimesis.

Much effort has been put into diminishing the ways that recordings and musicians betray themselves as living, breathing bodies and technologies, and not as unmediated events. While this may be a chief imperative of contemporary practices in the sonic arts (however futile it remains in practice, such as when the hiss of analogue recordings rendered them unmarketable after the advent of digital recordings), it is not the only one. Just as there are many ways to play a guitar, the same applies to recording technologies, the enormous diversity of which speaks to a plethora of intentions and aesthetic imperatives. Every configuration of technology is unique, and these unique iterations offer strengths and weaknesses to be exploited and sublimated according to the artist's intentions (or lack thereof). The phantasms of recorded sound do not pass by Weiss unnoticed, and indeed for him they are a source of some fascination. The presence of bodies creating sound
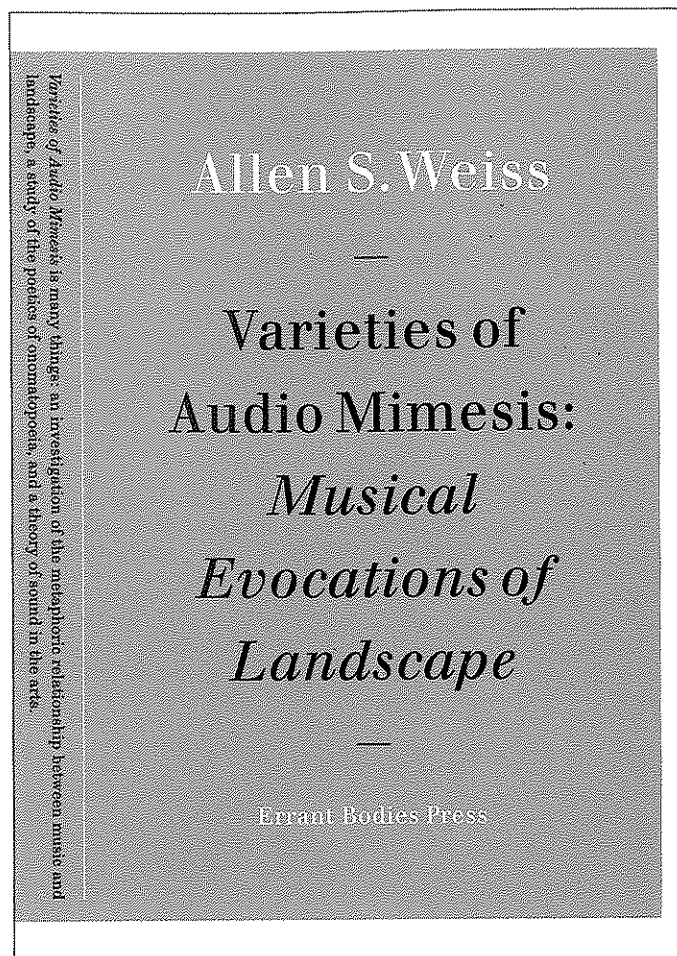
waves, and of recording technologies inscribing those waves, cannot be omitted from the recordings entirely. Furthermore, the varied ways artists approach this dilemma creates a rubric for the interpretation of their work.

When we listen to a recording we do not hear a sonic event, we experience the replication of an artfully mediated interpretation of what passes for this event—a mimetic performance on the part of technology, as orchestrated by skilled technicians. Replication becomes both addition and subtraction. The recording becomes the absence of the sonic event that created it, and the locus of the performed replication that recalls it. Our interpretation of this replication is colored by whether the artists concerned see the process of replication as part of the creative process, or as anathema to the achievement of their aims. *Varieties*, for the most part, focuses on the nuances or intonations of the various replication media themselves. Olivier Messiaen is a good example of someone who uses mimesis in the sonic arts. He composed music based on birdsong, but scored it for piano. As Weiss points out, the inherent contradiction here is that the piano is a mechanical instrument devoid of breath, paltry in its sostenuto. However, Weiss only draws attention to the *limitation* of the piano as a medium for sonic manipulation to stress the fact that, in Messiaen's hands, it leads

to the creation of a distinct vocal style. While the impetus for this style lies in a mimetic performance, and the sounds suggest birdsong, the recital does not *replicate* birdsong. What the listener hears is clearly not a bird, while leaving entirely hanging the existential implications of what the listener does hear. The result is a soundscape that is the product of transliteration, and the (on some level) infelicitous outcome of that transliteration. In the space of this all-too-human limitation, where we humans cannot reproduce in sound exactly what we hear, the full probity of Weiss's analysis becomes clear.

But regardless of the particular example chosen or its content, Weiss makes it plain that all recordings are indeed mimetic, whether they acknowledge this or not. And that it is to the act of mimesis that we must look if we are to find an often crucially overlooked aspect of the sonic arts.

> The aim of *Varieties of Audio Mimesis* is to elucidate the relation between both mimetic *and* abstract sounds as they reveal the depths of the natural world and the lineaments of our own phantasms. (11)

Weiss traces the technological imperative of mimesis from onomatopoeia in language, to mimesis in the tone and timbre of instruments, to stylizations in the construction of sonic artworks. The book begins with a passage from Thoreau's *Journal* (1852) and then proceeds with broad strokes through a set of multimedia examples of appropriation in language, both textual and oral. Language's beginnings may very well have been pure onomatopoeia, which led to humans mimicking sounds they heard in their immediate environment, utilizing vocalization in a purely glossolalic fashion. From this largely inchoate rendition of the mimetic derives linguistic onomatopoeia, which emphasizes that, "the role of onomatopoeia is not merely that of imitation: even more profoundly, onomatopoeia effects a rupture in signification leading to a renewed attention to the sounds themselves" (26).

The role of onomatopoeia is important to Weiss's story as it stresses the voice as medium and not simply as message, however much its role in literature designates a more secure place in history. For here, frozen in space, isolated on a page, it is impossible when considering mimesis to differentiate between literature and notated music (so long as we understand music in the precise manner that Cage did). In reference to Thoreau's onomatopoeic example, the similarity he discerned between the sound of "bees humming" and that of "the telegraph harp," Weiss stresses "the profound complexity of such audiophonic mimesis, [as it reveals] possible modes and structures of transpositions and substitutions between sounds" (21). Sonically speaking, the compositional imperative of such mimesis is paramount. As he goes on to say, "the mimetic quality of onomatopoeia is often not the simple, univocal (in the literal sense of the term: single vocalization) phenomenon it is most often made out to be, but rather a heterogeneous event of mimetic complexity, including spatial and temporal resonances as well as referential diversity" (21). This is an important point to grasp, for it grounds the idea of mimesis as a musical device far outside a strictly sonic framing. Choosing between different

types of onomatopoeia is akin to choosing between different musical notes. In expressing this point, Weiss begins to spin together the strands of a musical thread not confined to music alone. At once on and off key, the book includes color plates of David Teniers's *Cats' Concert* (1635) and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Concert in the Egg* (ca. 1450-1515). A great strength of *Varieties* lies in this linking of sound to the other arts, enabling Weiss to bring together a dazzling array of references in his characteristically rare style.

What he ultimately offers is a system of ontological classification, whose "recombinations" suggest "eight general categories:

1. concrete/hyperreal/evocative
2. concrete/hyperreal/ambient
3. concrete/stylized/evocative
4. concrete/stylized/ambient
5. notated/hyperreal/evocative
6. notated/hyperreal/ambient
7. notated/stylized/evocative
8. notated/stylized/ambient

(where concrete means "recorded," notated "performed," evocative "simulation," and ambient "mood" [44]). In other words, inside every recorded or reproduced fragment of sound are features suggestive of the methodologies of those beings and technologies involved in producing it. These clues, if paid the recommended attention, will yield not only a new perception of the sounds themselves but a way of navigating how the particular sounds were brought into being, which suggests a larger, more universal schema at work. By locating mimesis on either side of the music bar, Weiss offers both a way out and a way in for whomever might wish to follow him. His hope is "that this study of the microstructures of audiophonic representation will serve as a sort of listening guide to reveal previously unheard dimensions of familiar music and to suggest unimagined forms of a future sound art" (20).

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