

## “On the Surface of Silence: Reticence in the Music of Richard Chartier”

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CHAPTER FROM BOOK:

*BLOCKS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE UNBROKEN CONTINUUM* [ publisher: Sound 323, UK ] 2006

Listening to Richard Chartier’s work is like sitting in a room at dusk while the light fades. As colours and detail drain away the eye seeks to compensate, peering eagerly at the slowly disappearing surroundings. The fade-out provokes both ambition and anxiety in the perceiver, and the awareness of seeing and not-seeing becomes as important as the objects of perception. Chartier’s music plays a similar double game of seduction and evasion with the ear. It is no surprise that he once titled a track “Afterimage”. He makes extremely reticent work, with sounds often pitched at one or other end of the audible spectrum and mastered at such low volume that it is hard to make the compositions fully present to the ears. “Intended for quiet amplification or headphone use,” runs the note to his 2000 album series, making it clear that this is introverted music. Yet, just as shyness can be a means of drawing attention to oneself, the music pulls the ears towards its own disappearance. There is something almost irresistibly appealing about this reticence. Inevitably the listener wants to turn up the volume but this never quite works: the high frequencies hardly seem to get any louder and the low frequencies are simply too big for domestic speakers. The space and detail of the work is best approached in the withdrawn intimacy of headphone listening. Withdrawal, in fact, and withholding are fundamental terms of this elliptical music.

Chartier is one of the key figures in the current of reductionist electronic music sometimes tagged microsound: a form of extreme minimalism in which the music is sometimes very quiet, sometimes very sparse, often both. Musicians in the broader pan-global scene include Francisco Lopez, Ryoji Ikeda, Kim Cascone and Carsten Nicolai. Chartier co-founded the influential Line label, a subsidiary of 12K, with another of the music’s protagonists, Taylor Deupree, and he has since established his own label, 3particles. Besides Deupree, he is close to such neo-minimalists as Steve Roden and Bernhard Günter.

While Chartier certainly uses the two structural staples of contemporary electronic music, the loop and the drone, repetition is never used for its own sake or for merely hypnotic effect. His music is tense with shifts of direction and subtle moodswings. The nine tracks on series, for example, incorporate quite marked changes of atmosphere in places, although the sound palette is often forbiddingly spare. The structure of his pieces is hard to pin down, as the listener is drawn into a state of close-up intimacy with the sounds. His compositions are palimpsest-like, in that layers of sonic information are invisible or scarcely discernible to the listener – hence the continual hankering of the ear for satisfaction. Layers recede or become more prominent in the mix and a tone can vanish and then reappear in different form later in a piece. Short, punctual sounds are used in irregular sprinklings rather than to form the click-based rhythmic tracks that drive much glitch-oriented music.

The original sounds are often sine-sourced and Chartier also tends to cannibalise his own works, reconfiguring samples into unrelated forms. Recently he has sometimes used site recordings. The dominant sounds in his works are large bass tones, very high frequencies, scratchy textures and reverbed clicks. Each sound appears to be thoroughly worked and is carefully placed within musical arrangements that pay very close attention to dynamics, textural qualities and the balance of frequencies.

Born in 1971, Chartier has a background in design and painting, both of which he studied at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, graduating in 1993. He lives and works in Washington, DC and has a parallel existence as a graphic designer – examples of this work are his own minimal CD sleeves, which are dominated by simple blocks of colour. He has also worked as a painter. The visual background is important as it shapes the way he makes music. He does not consider himself a musician and his sleeve notes sometimes describe his pieces with the tactile and pragmatic word “formed”, rather than written or composed. From 1990 to 1993 he made synthesiser-based, drone-oriented music. He then abandoned music for a time to concentrate on his visual work. He returned to sound in 1997, drawn by the possibilities opened up by digital music, especially the potential for hiss-free low-volume material. Complete silence had become a compositional tool. Since then, as well as maintaining a steady output of CDs of consistently high quality, he has contributed numerous sound installations to galleries and has exhibited his paintings and graphic design work.

Many of Chartier’s full releases are limited to 500 copies and, in another artworld inflection, some are even signed. The newcomer to his work would do well to start with one of two compilations (Chartier is an assiduous self-documenter): *Overview* (3particles, 2004), which mainly covers post-2001 work, or *Other Materials* (3particles, 2003), which gathers music from the period 1999-2001. The most impressive single album is *series* (LINE), with its beautifully realised and prickly miniatures. *Decisive Forms* (trente oiseaux, 2001) is quite unlike series: a delicately constructed long work, which moves slowly from phase to phase of its existence. *Of Surfaces* (LINE, 2002) contains three extraordinary pieces, each built around colossal low tones. *Direct.Incidental.Consequential* (3particles, 2002) is a reconstruction of an out-of-print 1999 album that combines drones and jagged edges. *Two Locations* (LINE, 2004) collects two drone-based installation pieces, both softer-edged than much of the earlier work. Again the shifts are slow and delicate. There are several excellent collaborations. Of these the duo with Nosei Sakata, the rigorously pared-down *Varied* (12k, 2002), released under the name O/R, is particularly worth seeking out.

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In the third book of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* – a work that often reflects on listening and hearing – the narrator imagines an invalid putting wads of greased cotton wool into his ears to obliterate the sounds of the world outside the sick room. Then it occurs to the narrator that, rather than providing peace for the invalid, the sudden reduction in sound has the opposite effect:

Only yesterday the incessant noise in our ears, by describing to us in a continuous narrative all that was happening in the street and in the house, succeeded at length in sending us to sleep like a boring book; today on the surface of silence spread over our sleep, a shock louder than the rest manages to make itself heard, gentle as a sigh, unrelated to any other sound, mysterious; and the demand for an explanation which it exhales is sufficient to awaken us.<sup>1</sup>

It is not so much the proto-Cagean prescience of this passage that helps us think about Chartier, it is the idea that sound might make some sort of demand on the listener. A sound at the fringes of perception, reduced to the level of a sigh, awakens the curiosity of the sleeping mind. The ear drawn to what it barely hears. It moves towards it, as the eye pursues definition in a fading image. Unlike Cage's vital world of ambient sound, the everyday is Proust's "boring book" (itself a sly piece of self-deprecation), and a muffled shock is the prince's kiss that brings the listener to wakefulness. Chartier's low-volume music flirts with Proust's smothering "surface of silence" and his sounds impinge on the listener's awareness like that shocking but gentle sigh. They intrude as if they belong to an extrinsic sound world that is partly withheld from the listener.

For all the apparent austerity of Chartier's work, his pieces contain a great deal of sonic information – if you follow the music on an amplifier's level monitor you can see the surges of activity across the spectrum.<sup>2</sup> However, not all of the action is available to the listener, as parts of the music are pitched beneath the threshold of perception – another form of withholding. Hardware factors compound the issue: on certain tracks you are obliged to keep the volume low to prevent the bass tones damaging your equipment. So the ear fills in, supplying data where there is the merest suggestion of activity. The work brings into play a hallucinatory reflex that puts flesh on the shadows hiding in the corners of the mix.

The role of deletion in Chartier's working method contributes to the sense of something being held back. In interview he has remarked that he sometimes works by establishing a set of sounds around a core sound, which he then removes from the track, so its organising principle is absent: "My work is really a process of removal. Sometimes a piece will be based on one [looped] sound with things layered over it, and then eventually I will take the original linking element out. So it's this ghost element that's not really there."<sup>3</sup> That absence continues to exert a pressure on the work, lurking as an implied presence in the tracks and compounding the obscure impression that something is missing.

In place of Proust's everyday sound environment – the "boring book" with its "continuous narrative" – Chartier offers unpredictability and elusiveness. The work prefers a undemonstrative mode of discontinuity yet its narrative shifts often take the listener by surprise. It amounts to a withdrawn counter-narrative that reserves for itself a large degree of autonomy from the world around it (Chartier's ideal listening conditions would be 'closed' headphones – the kind that shut out the world – or an otherwise silent environment).<sup>4</sup> Chartier's work encounters the world by confronting and refusing it. The music's strictly guarded non-referential character is a means of throwing the listener back into the experience of listening itself.<sup>5</sup>

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Spatial arrangement offers another way into Chartier's work. He prefers to approach musical structure in the way that a painter or a designer might. He 'forms' his works with attention to factors such as colour, space, texture and depth of field. The aural space the listener is drawn into feels more like an irregular tour of abstract forms than a rhythm-bound tramline from A to B.

While Proust employs the term "surface of silence" to refer to a kind of counterpane over the sleeping body – almost a blank canvas for sound – the word 'surface' had a different and specialised meaning, related to painting, for one of Chartier's main influences, Morton Feldman.<sup>6</sup> For Feldman, the 'surface' of music was music considered with time-keeping "left alone".<sup>7</sup> He aspired to a music that allowed time its "unstructured existence". He described an opposition between the process of 'construction' or composition and the experience of "Time Undisturbed", a musical condition in which sounds could be deployed across the "time canvas" of music. Feldman saw his work as reaching an accommodation between this unstructured "time canvas" and the linear demands of musical time: "I prefer to think of my music as between categories. Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction, and its surface" (Feldman's italics).

A similar inbetweenness applies with Chartier. When he uses loops they are there as elements within pieces rather than as fundamental structuring devices that lock the works into a rhythmic grid. Repetition is always set against unpredictable variation and sound elements are often mobile, shifting about in the stereo spectrum. Such movement gives the work much of its spatial and gestural dynamism. In the *Two Locations* pieces the compositions develop slowly, blurring gradually into successive configurations. In other work, such as some of that on *series*, the tracks move more jerkily. Different pieces have distinct temporal qualities but it is clear that Chartier, like Feldman, is suspicious of time. Time, for him, is an elastic space and he allows his sound events to find their own temporal logic. Neither the physi-

cality of the drone nor the reassuring cycle of the loop allow the listener to settle into a defined relation to the music in hand. Instead such components are always set against the lateral variations and punctual events that give the work its unstable quality.

The bass tones of *Of Surfaces*, for example, throb in the background before surging forward at irregular intervals – it's rather like Feldman's idea of sound as a "wild beast". The slowness of the piece gives it a near-static quality, but its fitful movement allows it a compensating unruliness. When shoals of pin-prick crackles begin to speckle the composition they come in unpredictable clusters. Chartier's work gains its three-dimensional character by achieving such a balance between forward movement and sideways excursions.

This affection for the wildness of sound – its unsteadiness and unfixability – makes it difficult to plot one's way through a Chartier piece. His works have an immersive quality that encourages the listener to get pleasurably lost in them, pulled off the main drag and down narrow side tracks. Feeling the teasing, anticipatory pleasure of being drawn towards something not fully heard, the listener's curiosity moves tentatively among the flickering shapes thrown up by the music. The spatial richness can lead to a sensual self-enclosure, with the listener sinking into the experience of the physicality of sound.

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Christoph Cox has linked the work of recent electronic minimalism with the wave of minimalism in 1960s American art: artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Agnes Martin and Dan Flavin.<sup>8</sup> Chartier's CD artwork shows such an influence and the CD titles – *Of Surfaces*, *Other Materials*, *Decisive Forms* – reflect the neutral titles of the artwork of that era. Judd is a particularly relevant reference point where Chartier is concerned: he wrote his undergraduate senior art thesis on Judd's work.<sup>9</sup> The singularity of Chartier's music might derive from something close to one of the positions Judd takes in his famous 1965 article "Specific Objects". In the article Judd argues that, while painting and sculpture subordinate the whole to its constituent parts, with the new three-dimensional work: "the whole thing is made according to complex purposes, and these are not scattered but asserted by one form."<sup>10</sup>

Chartier's work has this overriding singleness of formal vision. While it is clearly formed of discrete parts, the work doesn't look beyond itself, it doesn't refer to other sounds or musical instruments, it is entirely conceived within the field of digital sound. And, like Judd's three-dimensional objects, it is faithful to itself as a medium: the audio is self-sufficient. Chartier allows his pieces to be governed by their own internal dynamics, finding specific arrangements of sound that integrate the various sonic objects he chooses to work with into coherent wholes.

The music has tended to be categorised in terms of an exemplary austerity. It is easy to see why. However, close listening reveals both a vacuum – that absolute digital silence – and an answering fullness. The counterpart of the work's vanishing quality is its urge to make itself present. To a degree, this is attributable to the way in which the ear bodies out the sounds it cannot quite grasp – the aural fantasy that the work brings into play. At the same time, it is work of extreme concentration and the sounds that are there in the music are rich with information. The work is ultimately experienced in terms of density as well sparseness, sensuality as well as coolness. The form of minimalism that Chartier has developed on his CDs favours listening conditions that are private, introverted and solitary. Yet the bareness of the works is illusory: under the microscope that he obliges each listener to peer down, a pulsating aural life becomes apparent.

Chartier's music is motivated by three kinds of withdrawal: the low volume that tickles the ear's curiosity, the vestigial presence of deleted material in the music and its non-referentiality. It is both image and afterimage, standing between the explicit and the implicit. Chartier's work bends the ears along barely signposted trajectories that they want to follow, drawing the perceiver into an awareness of the act of perception as a form of fabrication. The evasive drift of the music serves to provoke an corresponding alertness in the listening ear. Far from a dry musical solipsism, his music makes pressing demands on the listener and insists on an engaged listening encounter. At times it may seem as gentle as Proust's sigh on the surface of silence but it is through this insistent pull on the listener's attention that the music acquires itself so exceptionally.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, volume 3 of *In Search of Lost Time*; 6 volumes, trs CK Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, and revised by DJ Enright (London, Vintage, 1996), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Chartier's suggestion, in his 2001 *Ambientrance* interview. The article is reproduced, like several of those cited below, at <http://www.12k.com/interviews.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Boon, "Removal Company", *The Wire* 218, April 2002: 14.

<sup>4</sup> Email from RC, 15 April 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See the Whitney Biennial Curatorial Statement, at [www.12k.com/interviews.htm](http://www.12k.com/interviews.htm). See also Christoph Cox, "Return to Form", *Artforum International* XLII: 3 (November 2003) 67, for a brief but useful survey of neo-modernist tendencies in the work of contemporary sound artists.

<sup>6</sup> *Ambientrance* interview. Chartier, Bernhard Günter and Steve Roden each contribute a piece to *For Morton Feldman* (Trente Oiseaux, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Morton Feldman, "Between Categories" in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* (Cambridge, Exact Change, 2000), 83-89 [first published in 1969]. All subsequent Feldman quotes are taken from this essay.

<sup>8</sup> See Cox, cited above.

<sup>9</sup> Email from RC, 10 February, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Judd "Specific Objects", REF TK