

I SWEAR I HEARD THIS...

NOISE FLOOR

Sam Riley

I kept hearing it. At first it was welcome.

The harsh amplitudes of full sonic spectrum overloaded the speakers in the hall. Each vibration pulsed as much through my body as much as my ears, which had become saturated in the melee. And then, suddenly – just as it seemed we might feedback forever – the pummelling affects in my chest jolted from a frantic vacillation to stasis. I associated a whiplash of this kind with an audible shift, but the confounding seconds rushed past without expected silence. My ears took on an estranged hearing which continued cycling through the repetitive artefacts of blistering noise. The speaker cones appeared still, yet their shrieks continued to haunt me. Some more seconds past, I finished my drink and turned to Elliot. My body began to follow him, as well as a steady stream of attendees filing out the venue, to the train station. My ears remained enmeshed in repetitive cycles of the last sixty minutes.

Elliot's voice had taken on a new timbre. He gargled as we sat on the train, the upper frequencies of his register replaced with a buzzsaw tremolo which lingered in my cochlear. It seemed he was initiating the usual routine of a post-show debrief. I attempted to reply, not entirely cognisant of his position, and found that my voice had changed too. The familiar resonant vibrations of my vestibular were fractured with each syllable I tried to form: no longer sounding words, I could voice only breakup to the noise floor. I strained and mimicked expected movements – striving for pretence of back and forth, forming breath, making sound – while squeezing away from the fluctuating frequencies of my transmogrified subject. I spoke through the mutant and Elliot's spoke back in a mutant tongue. In its illegibility, our usual anecdotal reflection was supplanted with a continual cycle – reliving the minutes upon I wished to speak. The possessed conversation strove for an appearance of the mundane, anxious that a passersby might glance its haunted sound and reveal its spectral metamorphosis.

The train pulled out the station, its low rumble joined our incoherent chatter, and overlaid saturated frequencies in phantasmal counterpoint. I began to relish the continued sound; a private performance each of us could audit independently. The oscillations of our voices and the wheels beneath us gradually merged to a slow crescendo as the journey progressed: soon the real encroached, percolating further into the foreground to eventually surpass a frozen moment of feedback. But still, subtly, it lingered – hiding in the quiet.

Sixth months later, the moment erupted again.

Sam Riley is completing a PhD at the University of Birmingham. Their research tracks the cultural politics of music culture in Leningrad and St Petersburg through shifting infrastructures of late and post-socialism.

