

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Listen: An Interview with American Sound Artist Jeph Jerman

Aram Yardumian · Thursday, September 8th, 2011

In the end, whether we consider Postmodern music a calculated response to Modernist forms, or a convex re-analysis of music in general, the act of listening remains deeply mysterious. Whether we ascribe universal meaning to *Mass in B Minor* or *The Pirates of Penzance* within their authorial and historical contexts, or devise a hyperlogical system to register tones as phonemes, [4?33?](#) and [The Well-Tuned Piano](#) still stare back like Rorschach blotter. Perhaps the acme of Postmodern music will be an authorless text without any possible universal interpretation, only individual descriptions and resonances, such that the only possible recourse will be to listen. The act of listening is not getting any less mysterious, or vital, as technology changes. Nor are the distinctions between content and process becoming any more important. As long as resistance to poetic registers in critical description remain, so will commitments to the worst possible misapprehensions: the substance is overlooked while the procedures are hunted down and taxidermized.

Jeph Jerman doesn't need me to tell him he's post-anything. In fact, he prefers I would shut my mouth and listen. Yet because his sound resembles little else, his influences are diffuse and distant, and in many ways he has reinvented [John Cage's](#) notion of automaticism for himself, from the ground up, I felt compelled to investigate. As early as 1981, Jerman was recording environmental sounds to listen to in raw form, and feed into tape loops. His interest at this time was not in making music, per se, but in sound experiments. Though he released nothing, as he says, "worth listening to" until 1987, some of his earlier material has recently been made available on CD. Jerman's early work as [Hands To](#), and with the noise-unit [City of Worms](#), is rich in grays and blacks, tones of earth and metals flickering against the walls of your ears; vast ambient spaces and tight, deep underground tunnels. Sometimes the sonorous roar of hundreds warehouse district machines all blend together at night; the occasional voice rises like water from soft sand; futuristic metropolises collapsing into the mighty rivers that gave them life — or perhaps none of these things, for it is impossible to know, at present, what is actually in the text. Many of Jerman's works in this phase are apparently idea-based and framed by the limits of his equipment; their programs are kept so hidden that you must give in and just listen. The overall structures of these early tape works is careful and contemplated, even if the vibe are dank and unfathomable, and occasionally gives the impression that it is a transmission from somewhere else, using Jerman as its shamanic medium.

[Jump to continue ? ? ?](#) and listen to some of Jeph's work.

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