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# Yasunao Tone Makes Beautiful Noise in Brooklyn

Article

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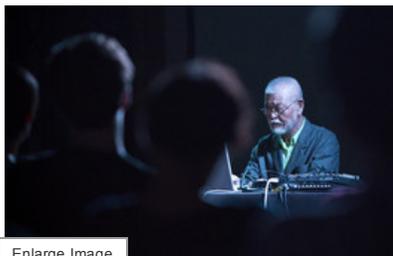
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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

A longtime proponent of contrast and incongruity, Yasunao Tone assumed his preferred form Tuesday night in Brooklyn when he doffed his haberdasher's hat, shuffled into a performance space and took his place, quietly, at a computer. The 78-year-old artist's style of dress was neat—tidy checked shirt tucked into pressed pants, suit jacket—and his demeanor was serene.

His performance for a hushed audience at Issue Project Room in downtown Brooklyn, however, made for a perplexing match: a loud, chaotic mass of meta-musical noise.



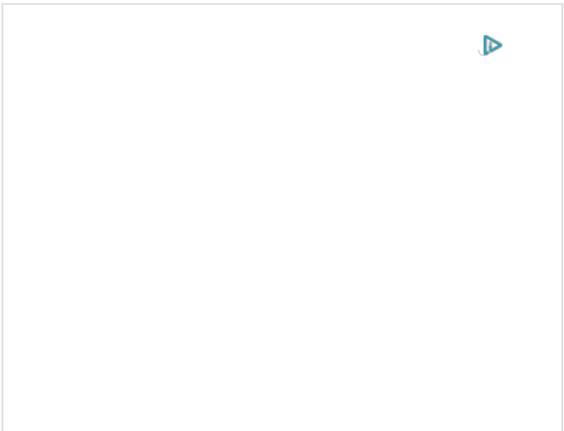
Enlarge Image  
Andrew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal  
Yasunao Tone during his performance at Issue Project Room on Tuesday.

Not just noise but shrieking, scabrous, excoriating noise of a sort that Mr. Tone has produced, in different incarnations, since the early 1960s. Back then, he was among the earliest members of the multimedia Fluxus movement and a product of a teeming postwar art scene in Japan. Decades later, he remains a thrillingly confounding artist and an inveterate New Yorker still getting his proper due.

"I think people will be surprised to know that the usual notion of Asian music will be totally destroyed when they listen to his music or read his scores," said Yoko Ono, an early compatriot of Mr. Tone's in Japan and at subsequent Fluxus art "events" in New York. "He is not Asian. He is Martian."

More than just the music of Asia, Mr. Tone's work as a composer and conceptual artist upends notions of sound and media of all kinds. At Issue Project Room, he performed on a laptop with proprietary "MP3 Deviation" software developed in collaboration with computer engineers to explore mistakes and malfunctions of music in the digital domain. It was an extrapolation on work, begun in the early 1980s, for which he made wildly abstract music with "wounded CDs"—disks that he mangled with scratches and pieces of adhesive tape.

"I'm interested in the concept of how to generate sound with nobody playing



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instruments," Mr. Tone said at his home in Chinatown one afternoon last week, between sips of green tea. His English is limited, and his disposition deferential and shy, but his voice has been forceful in the chorus of New York's avant-garde for more than 40 years.

After moving to the city in 1972, Mr. Tone reconnected with the pioneering multimedia artist Nam Jun Paik, who helped usher him into the New York art world. For his first performance in the city, at the Avant Garde Festival of New York in 1973, Mr. Tone staged a soundless action in Grand Central Terminal that involved people walking around each other in the pattern of planets in orbit. Other, more musical, pieces made use of blocks of ice placed on piano keys. "I put the ice block on the keyboard instead of pressing," Mr. Tone said. "The ice would melt and the tone clusters would change." Another piece, "Radio Music," enlisted about a dozen radios dialed to different frequencies and then tuned into sync.

Experimentation of this sort aligned Mr. Tone with Fluxus founder George Maciunas, an avant-garde showman whose presence in downtown New York was formidable. "Everybody thought he was the Pope, so I think he was difficult for other people," Mr. Tone said of Maciunas, whose ranks he had joined in the early 1960s while still living in Japan. (Some of Mr. Tone's work from that period figured into the recent MoMA exhibition "Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde.") "He was actually very sweet. Once, my staying permission expired, and he helped me go to the immigration office. He pretended to be a lawyer."

It was a work of performance art born out of necessity. "For me," Mr. Tone laughed, "it was a Fluxus 'event.'"

Other early allies included the philosophical composer John Cage, with whom he shared a pointed sense of play, and the choreographer Merce Cunningham, who commissioned Mr. Tone to accompany some experimental dance pieces beginning in the 1970s. His dance scores made prescient use of multiple turntables spinning at variable speeds and electronic interventions into broadcasts of sound and speech.

These days, Mr. Tone is focused on the newest variant of the media manipulations that have figured prominently in his work from the start. In May, he released a new collaborative album, "Convulsive Threshold," with the English musician Russell Haswell. The latter's analog electronic contributions mingle with blasts of refracted sound from Mr. Tone's "MP3 Deviation" software, which modifies the MP3 decoding process and thus generates mistaken sounds. The result is chaotic and highly charged, cerebral in its conceptual intent but with a bracing sense of urgency.

Lawrence Kumpf, artistic director at Issue Project Room, attributed Mr. Tone's mounting legacy to ways that he has sustained a similar sense of urgency over time, with notions of medium and message transforming all around him. "He was exploring a systemized area of obsolescence from his early work, but Yasunao is creating innovative ways to translate this into digital media, which a lot of people don't engage because there's a limited set of ways in which [digital media] can malfunction," Mr. Kumpf said. "He's using this limited vocabulary to create a very expansive practice."

Asked how his thinking throughout the tumultuous multimedia age has changed, Mr. Tone said, simply: "I don't recognize genre or categories. It's a good thing."

*A version of this article appeared July 4, 2013, on page A18 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: A Quiet Musician Who Gets Very Loud.*

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