The subject of Attali's book is noise, and his method is likewise noise. His un­
concealed ideological premises, his penchant for sullying the purity of pitch
structures with references to violence, death, and (worst of all) money, and his
radically different account of the history of Western music all jar cacophonously
against the neat ordering of institutionalized music scholarship, especially as it
is practiced in the United States. It is, therefore, quite conceivable that those
trained in music will perceive the book's content also as noise—that is, as non­
sense—and dismiss it out of hand.

Such dismissal would not surprise Attali, for among his observations he in­
cludes remarks on the rise of positivistic musicology and pseudoscientific music
theory, both of which depend upon and reenforce the concept that music is au­
tonomous, unrelated to the turbulence of the outside, social world. But it would
be most unfortunate if the mechanisms that have already done so much to silence
the human and social dimensions of our music (past and present, classical and
popular) succeeded also in silencing the noise of this book. For if Attali can
serve to jolt a few musicians awake or to encourage those attempting to forge
new compositional or interpretive directions, then the hope he expresses for a
new music—controlled neither by academic institutions nor by the entertain­
ment/recording industry—may be at least partially realized.

Noise poses so many provocative questions that to try to respond adequately
to it would require another book—or, indeed, new fields of study, new modes
of creating, distributing, and listening to music. In this essay I shall address and
amplify three issues raised by Attali: first, the means by which silence has been
imposed and is maintained by our theories and histories of music, by our performance practices and educational institutions; second, the concept that music articulates the ways in which societies channel violence and some ways in which this concept might be used in constructing a revised history of music; and third, the most recent of Attali's four stages of music (Composition) and signs of its emergence in the seven years that have passed since the original publication of Noise.

The idea that music can be regarded as silenced, even as its din surrounds us deafeningly at all times, seems a paradox, but it is central to Attali's argument. Unless one can accept this idea and its far-reaching implications, one cannot respond sympathetically to his narrative or prognosis. But the theories of music that have shaped our perceptions and consumption of music have been instrumental in conditioning us not to recognize silencing—not to realize that something vital may be missing from our experience.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, music theory has hovered indecisively between defining music as belonging with the sciences and mathematics or with the arts. Its use in communal rituals and its affective qualities would seem to place it among the products of human culture, yet the ability of mathematics to account for at least some of its raw materials (tones, intervals, etc.) has encouraged theorists repeatedly to ignore or even deny the social foundations of music. The tendency to deal with music by means of acoustics, mathematics, or mechanistic models preserves its mystery (accessible only to a trained priesthood), lends it higher prestige in a culture that values quantifiable knowledge over mere expression, and conceals the ideological basis of its conventions and repertories. This tendency permits music to claim to be the result not of human endeavor but of rules existing independent of humankind. Depending on the conditions surrounding the production of such a theory, these rules may be ascribed to the physical-acoustical universe or may be cited as evidence for a metaphysical realm more real than the imperfect material, social world we inhabit.

Now it is quite clear to most listeners that music moves them, that they respond deeply to music in a variety of ways, even though in our society they are told that they cannot know anything about music without having absorbed the whole theoretical apparatus necessary for music specialization. But to learn this apparatus is to learn to renounce one's responses, to discover that the musical phenomenon is to be understood mechanistically, mathematically. Thus non-trained listeners are prevented from talking about social and expressive dimensions of music (for they lack the vocabulary to refer to its parts) and so are trained musicians (for they have been taught, in learning the proper vocabulary, that music is strictly self-contained structure). Silence in the midst of sound.

A few examples. Jean Philippe Rameau is recognized as the founder of tonal harmonic theory—the theory developed first to account for music of the eigh-
teenth century, later extended to nineteenth-century repertories. Musicians have been trained for the last two hundred years to perceive music in Rameau’s terms—as sequences of chords—and thus his formulations seem to us self-evident. Before Rameau’s *Traité de l’harmonie* [Treatise on Harmony] (1722), theories and pedagogical methods dealt principally with two aspects of music: coherence over time (mode) and the channeling of noise in the coordination of polyphonic voices (counterpoint). In this tradition, the integrity of a composition’s sense of motion and formal unfolding was preserved, and simultaneities were treated contextually—as formations that emerged from communal activity and that continued on in accordance with rules for dissonance control, with the verbal text, and with the modal structure. Rameau, in a striking reworking of Descartes’ *Cogito* manifesto, declared this earlier tradition moribund and, in seeking to build a musical system from reason and science, hailed the triad as the basis of music.

Now to be sure, the major triad can be generated from very simple mathematical principles, and its pitches occur in the overtone series. It appears thus to be inscribed in nature (not invented arbitrarily by culture), and its music seems to be therefore the music dictated by the very laws of physics. Yet the triad is inert. Breaking a piece of music down into a series of its smallest atomic units destroys whatever illusion of motion it might have had. It yields a chain of freeze-frame stills, all of which turn out to be instances of triads. Mathematical certainty and the acoustical seal of approval are bought at the price of silence and death, for text, continuity, color, inflection, expression, and social function are no longer relevant issues. The piece is paralyzed, laid out like a cadaver, dismembered, and cast aside.

Heinrich Schenker’s neo-Hegelian theoretical program early in this century attempted to restore to music theory the accounting for motion, the illusion of organically unfolding life he detected in German music from Bach to Brahms. His principal treatise, *Der freie Satz* [Free Composition] (1935), is expressly metaphysical in intent—the work of an Austrian Jew between the world wars who sought evidence of transcendent certainty and meaning in this music. The book is intensely, almost desperately, rigorous as he demonstrates the underlying process that characterizes all “great” (that is, eighteenth and nineteenth-century German) music. Details of expression, rhetoric—even vocal texts—are dismissed as surface irrelevances in his search for higher truth. Ironically, while his treatise provides the key to much of the implicit ideology of the standard German repertory, Schenker conceals his observations in formalisms. As a further irony, Schenker’s work has been accepted as one of the principal modes of academic analysis in the United States, but only after it was stripped of its ideological trappings: in the recent translation (trans. Ernst Oster [New York: Longman, 1979]) the sections involved with mysticism and German supremacy have been moved to an appendix. The book now reads like a cut-and-dried method and is
meant to be used as one. If Schenker silenced the cries of uncertainty and anguish apparent in the discontinuities of so much nineteenth-century music by showing that it all is—in the final analysis—normative and consistent with the laws of God, American Schenkerians have in turn silenced his metaphysical quest.

What does it matter in the real world of production and listening what music theorists say to one another? Inasmuch as musicians who are trained in conservatories or universities are required to have had at least two (often three or four) years of such theoretical study, it can matter quite a bit: our performers, historians, and composers by and large are taught that music has no meaning other than its harmonic and formal structure.

The performers on whom we rely to flesh out notated scores into sound are trained not to interpret (understood as the imposition of the unwanted self on what is fantasized to be a direct transmission of the composer's subjective intentions to the listener), but rather to strive for a perfect, standard sound, for an unbroken, polished surface. Such performers became ideal in the nineteenth century as grist for the symphony orchestra in which the conductor usurped complete control over interpretation and needed only the assurance of dependable sound production from the laboring musician. In our century of Repetition, they have remained ideal for purposes of the recording industry, which demands perfection and the kind of consistency that facilitates splicing. And our mode of consuming music as background decor (Beethoven's C# Minor Quartet played as Muzak at academic cocktail parties) favors performances that call no attention to themselves.

Because Attali's book locates musical social significance in its channeling of noise and violence—qualities almost entirely lacking in our musical experiences—his point is likely to be met with incomprehension. But he is absolutely right. If the noise of classical music (portrayals of the irrational in Bach, the Prometheusan struggles of Beethoven, the bitter irony and agonizing doubt of Mahler) is no longer audible, it is because it has been contained by a higher act of violence. To refuse to enact the ruptures of a discontinuous musical surface is to silence forcibly, to stifle the human voice, to render docile by means of lobotomy. It is this mode of performance that characterizes our concert halls and recordings today. It leads us to believe that there never was meaning, that music always has been nothing but pretty, orderly sound.

Likewise historians of music, given their commitment to positivistic research and formal descriptions of music, limit their programs to questions that can be answered factually. Problems of the sort Attali raises are not simply solved differently in musicology—they are not even posed, for to attempt solving them would lead necessarily into forbidden speculation. If the piece of music is but a series of chords on a notated grid, then there exists no way of linking it to the
outside world. Research involves the conditions surrounding the material production of the work and the preparation of increasingly rigorous scholarly editions. Musicology remains innocent of its own ideology, of the tenets with which it marks the boundaries between its value-free laboratory and the chaotic social world. Reduced to an artifact to be dated and normatively described, the piece of music is sealed and stockpiled, prevented from speaking its narrative of violence and order.

Composers raised within the academic context have been silenced in a way perhaps more detrimental than other members of the musical caste. For the music of the concert repertory (the mainstay of performers, musicologists, and theorists) did at least get to present some semblance of live drama at some time in history. But the university that has provided a shelter for alienated artists for the last forty years has also encouraged them to pursue increasingly abstract, mathematically based, deliberately inaccessible modes of composition. A curious reversal has occurred: the relentless serial noise of Schoenberg's protest against the complacent bourgeoisie has become the seat of institutionalized order, while attempts by younger composers to communicate, to become expressive, are dismissed as noise—the noise of human emotion and social response. The battle between the New York Uptown and Downtown schools of composition (which will be dealt with again later in this essay) is being waged over what counts as noise, what counts as order, and who gets to marginalize whom. Attali's *Noise*, as it traces the contours of the invisible, inaudible network controlling our musical world, helps immeasurably in clarifying the issues underlying today's upheavals.

Attali's model for the ideological criticism of music (based on the idea that the relationship between noise and order in a piece or repertory indicates much about how the society that produced this music channels violence) owes a great deal to Theodor Adorno. Attali's model differs, however, in that Attali is not bound up with Adorno's love/hate relationship with German culture, which caused him on the one hand to despise all else as trivial or primitive, but on the other to call attention to signs of totalitarianism, self-willed silence, and finally death in the German musical tradition. Adorno's program is first that of a Cassandra and then that of a coroner performing an autopsy. Attali may likewise resemble Cassandra (and the future may prove him a coroner as well), but his model permits him to consider a much wider spectrum of music, to recognize the German tradition as an extremely important moment in the continuum of Western music, but to be able in addition to recognize popular genres and ethnic, early, and new musics. The insights of both Adorno and Attali, however, are results of a refusal to read the history of music as a flat, autonomous chronological record, an insistence on understanding musical culture of the past as a way of grasping social practices of the present and future. Both take the music we
If American musicology is concerned with polishing the surfaces of compositions for affirmative appreciation—indeed with polishing the entire history of style into a chain of bright, attractively packaged commodities—what sort of historical narrative would Attali’s model produce? He has provided an outline, filled in occasionally with evocative examples that whet (but do not fully satisfy) the appetite. Such spottiness is characteristic of the early stages of most paradigm shifts. But his model does offer the key to a revitalized version of the history of Western (and even, by extension, non-Western) music, and it is possible to apply it productively to repertories he does not discuss at length.

For instance, several elements of seventeenth-century music can be richly illuminated both by Attali’s succession of stages (Sacrifice, Representation, etc.) and by his concept of examining the opposition of socially legitimated order and noise in explaining style change. Polemic discussions concerning style—rival taxonomies, competitive claims to authorized lines of descent, and ideologically polarized sets of tastes—were rampant in the seventeenth century, indicating that it might be a period of particular interest to an enterprise connecting music and social/economic factors. But the seventeenth century is not usually treated very seriously in musicology, for its music is (in terms of our standard tonal expectations) noise. If we take Attali at his most daring and permit ourselves to assume that music truly heralds changes that are only later apparent in other aspects of culture, we may find explanations for several problems in seventeenth-century music scholarship: for the upheaval in style around 1600, for the peculiar contradictory story concerning the invention of opera advanced by its first practitioners, for the staunch resistance in France to Italian style, and for modern musicology’s tendency to write the century off as primitive.

Attali locates the stage of Representation (music for the bourgeois audience) in the nineteenth century. I wish to propose that it appeared much earlier, that it was ushered in with great fanfare with the invention of opera, monody, and sonata in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

Indeed, opera was first called *stile rappresentativo*, and its express purpose was to make spectators believe in—to experience directly—the dramatic struggles enacted in its performances. In place of the equal-voiced polyphony of the previous style (now dubbed by the rebels as the *prima prattica* [“first practice,” as opposed to the new, modern “second practice”], it made use of flamboyant, virtuosic individuals. Its technical means involved a particular transformation of earlier syntactical procedures that resulted in constant surface control and long-term goal orientation (the essential ingredients of tonality and, not coincidentally, of capitalism).

It is significant that opera (and parallel solo genres) developed not in the context of the hereditary feudal aristocracy (which is often assumed by historians
and social critics of opera), but in the courts of northern Italy that were sustained by commerce and later, after 1637, in public opera houses. Despite the humanistic red herrings proffered by Peri, Caccini, and others to the effect that they were reviving Greek performance practices, these gentlemen knew very well that they were basing their new reciting style on the improvisatory practices of contemporary popular music. Thus the eagerness with which the humanist myth was constructed and elaborated sought both to conceal the vulgar origins of its techniques and to flatter the erudition of its cultivated patrons.

Moreover, the plots themselves repeatedly involve the subversion of the inherited social hierarchy. Orfeo as a demigod (between the gods and the plebian shepherds) willfully breaks through traditional barriers, first in his seduction of the deified nobility through his great individual virtuosity that wins him admission into the forbidden Inferno, and second in his apotheosis. Monteverdi's Poppea, Alidoro in Cesti's Orontea, and Scarlatti's Griselda succeed in penetrating the aristocracy by force of their erotic charms, talent, or virtue (all of which qualify as noise in a static, ordered social structure). What is represented, what one is made to believe in this music is the rightful emergence of the vital, superior middle-class individual in defiance of the established, hereditary class system.

That there should have been attempts at dismissing the new style as noise is to be expected, and the spokesmen for traditional authority rushed in with lists of errors committed by the new composers in voice-leading and dissonance control (quite literally complaints concerning the mischanneling of violence). The almost raw erotic energy of the new style swept over Europe, nonetheless, meeting real opposition in only one place: the France of Louis XIV. This too is to be expected, for the individual-centered explosivity of the Italian compositional procedures (with their compelling momentum, enjambments, and climaxes), performance practices (with improvised effusions added on the spot by the individual singer), and subversive plots could only have revealed the oppressiveness of Louis' absolutist regime of enforced Platonic harmony. Italian music was, in fact, banned in France, clearly for ideological reasons; but the documents comparing Italian and French styles refer not to politics directly, but to matters of orderliness, harmoniousness, and tastefulness (French bon goût or good taste versus Italian noise). If the violence of Italian music is right on the surface, luring us along and detonating periodically to release its pent-up tension, violence is equally present in French music—but it is inaudible. It is that which has silenced the noise, systematically siphoned off the tension, leaving only pretty blandness. The most worrisome aspects of music to a regimented society—the areas in which noise is most likely to creep in, such as physical motion and ornamentation—are the most carefully policed in French performance. Exact formulas for the bowing of stringed instruments and for the precise execution of ornaments were codified and enforced: the performer was most regulated
exactly where he would ordinarily be permitted to exercise greatest individual spontaneity.

Why does musicology avoid taking the seventeenth century seriously? Precisely because the ideological struggles that put tonality, opera, and solo instrumental music (and their economic, philosophical, and political counterparts) in place by the eighteenth century are distressing to witness—especially if one wants to hang onto the belief that tonality (and capitalism, parliamentary democracy, Enlightenment rationalism) are inevitable and universal. Only when the dust of the seventeenth century settles and the new ideological structures are sufficiently stabilized to seem eternal can we begin to perform acts of canonization and the kind of analysis that seeks to confirm that ours is truly the only world that works. The seventeenth century reveals the social nature and thus the relative status of tonal music’s ‘‘value-free’’ foundation.

This interpretation of the seventeenth century goes counter to Attali’s only in that he places the transition to Representation considerably later. It validates, however, the concepts central to his position: that music announces changes that only later are manifested in the rest of culture and that it is in terms of the noise/order polarity that styles define themselves ideologically against predecessors or contemporaneous rival practices. A history of Western music rewritten on the basis of these principles would be extraordinarily valuable, for musicians still stuck with sterile chronologies, but especially for nonmusicians who (as Attali demonstrates so well) must have access to the kinds of insights music offers.

Attali’s term for the hope of the future, Composition, seems strange at first glance, for this is the word used in Western culture for centuries to designate the creation of music in general. But the word has been mystified since the nineteenth century, such that it summons up the figure of a semidivine being, struck by holy inspiration, and delivering forth ineffable delphic utterances. Attali’s usage returns us to the literal components of the word, which quite simply means ‘‘to put together.’’ It is this demystified yet humanly dignified activity that Attali wishes to remove from the rigid institutions of specialized musical training in order to return it to all members of society. For in Attali’s eyes, it is only if the individuals in society choose to reappropriate the means of producing art themselves that the infinite regress of Repetition (whether in the sense of externally generated serial writing or of mass reproduction) can be escaped.

In the scant seven years since Noise was published, extraordinary evidence of such tendencies in music has emerged. It was in the mid-1970s that New Wave burst on the scene in England, with precisely the motivation suggested by Attali at his most optimistic and with the mixed results he also realistically anticipated. Many of the original groups began as garage bands formed by people not educated as musicians who intended to defy noisily the slickly marketed ‘‘nonsense’’ of commercial rock. The music is often aggressively simple syntac-
tically, but at its best it conveys most effectively the raw energy of its social and musical protest. It bristles with genuine sonic noise (most of it maintains a decibel level physically painful to the uninitiated), and its style incorporates other features that qualify as cultural noise: the bizarre visual appearance of many of its proponents, texts with express political content, and deliberate inclusion of blacks and of women (not as the traditional "dumb chicks" singing to attract the libidinous attention of the audience, but—taboo of taboos—as competent musicians playing instruments, even drums).

The grass-roots ideology of the New Wave movement has been hard to sustain, as the market has continually sought to acquire its products for mass reproduction. Even among the disenfranchised, the values of capitalism are strong, and many groups have become absorbed by the recording industry. The realization that much of their most ardent protest was being consumed as "style" caused a few groups, such as the Sex Pistols, to disband shortly after they achieved fame. But while there exists a powerful tendency for industry to contain the noise of these groups by packaging it, converting it into style-commodity, the strength of the movements is manifested by the seeming spontaneous generation of ever more local groups. The burgeoning of Composition, still somewhat theoretical in Attali's statement of 1977, has been actualized and is proving quite resilient.

The same seven-year period has witnessed a major shift in "serious" music, away from serialism and private-language music toward music that strives once again to communicate. Whether performance art, minimalism, or neo-tonality, the new styles challenge the ideology of the rigorous, autonomous, elitist music produced in universities for seminars. They call into question the institutions of academic training and taxonomies, of orchestras and opera houses, of recording and funding networks.

Many of the principal figures in these new styles come from groups traditionally marginalized, who are defined by the mainstream as noise anyway, and who thus have been in particularly good positions to observe the oppressive nature of the reigning order. Women, for instance, are not only strongly represented in these new modes of Composition—they are frequently leaders, which has never before been the case in Western "art" music. Instead of submitting their voices to institutionalized definitions of permissible order, composers such as Laurie Anderson and Joan La Barbara celebrate their status as outsiders by highlighting what counts in many official circles as noise. Some individuals composing new kinds of music were originally associated with other media (David Hykes with film, for instance) or have found their most responsive audiences among dancers and visual artists (Philip Glass). All are people who managed not to be silenced by the institutional framework, who are dedicated to injecting back into music the noise of the body, of the visual, of emotions, and of gender.
For the most part, this music is far more vital than the music of Repetition, which has deliberately and systematically drained itself of energy. Many practitioners of Composition fight the tendency toward objectification by making live, multimedia performance a necessary component of the work. Others (such as Pauline Oliveros) explore the possibility of breaking down the barrier between producer and consumer by designing instructions for participatory events. Collaborative efforts (combining music, drama, dance, video) are prominent in these movements. The traditional taxonomic distinction between high and popular culture becomes irrelevant in the eclectic blends characteristic of this new music, and indeed many of these new composers are as often as not classified as New Wave and perform in dance clubs. A new breed of music critic (such as John Rockwell and Gregory Sandow) has begun to articulate the way the world looks (and sounds) without the distortion of that distinction.

Composition, as Attali defines it, is coming increasingly to the fore, displacing the musical procedures and the networks of Repetition. That these new movements signal not simply a change in musical taste but also of social climate seems extremely plausible, though how exactly the change will be manifested in other areas of culture remains to be seen. At the very least the new movements seem to herald a society in which individuals and small groups dare to reclaim the right to develop their own procedures, their own networks. Noise, by accounting theoretically for these new ways of articulating possible worlds through sound and by demonstrating the crucial role music plays in the transformation of societies, encourages and legitimates these efforts.