

## 21M.065: Intro to Musical Composition (Keeril Makan), Assignment 1 — “Silent Day”

For me, a day without music is a typical day. Although I have my alarm set to play music, I wake up to the noise of it spinning up the CD, and usually snooze it or shut it off before it starts playing music. The only reason I even vaguely remember what the song sounds like is that, sometimes, I wake up before my alarm, and forget to shut it off before leaving my room; I hear it for a few seconds when I return to my room after breakfast.

I do not own an iPod nor an mp3 player. My “music library” consists of a mental list of six pieces, three of which I can find on YouTube<sup>1</sup>, three of which are instrumental<sup>2</sup>, and two of which I know by heart<sup>3</sup>. I seek them out perhaps once a month or so, and five of the six I like primarily for the memories I associate them with (my memories of Canada/USA Mathcamp).

My cell phone is usually on vibrate, and I think that when it’s not muted, its ring tone is generic. My laptop is usually on mute. I occasionally play video games, and so hear the background music and the sound effects, though I don’t play often during the semester. I watch TV in spurts, if at all; I watch all of *Full Metal Alchemist* over winter break, and I watched *How to Train Your Dragon* some time before that, though I can’t remember the movie I watched before that, nor how long ago it was. I am more likely to seek escape from the world through literature than through audio-visual media. When I do watch YouTube videos, I usually watch educational videos, such as the RSanimate series, One Minute Physics, or a lecture on a programming language or science topic.

The places I frequent usually do not play music or, if they do, I do not notice it. I rarely attend parties. My neighbors do not blast music, and have not for at least the past year or so. There is no music playing in the bathrooms I use, in the elevators I use, in the stairwells I use, in the athena clusters I use, in the libraries I visit, nor in the hallways of the main classroom complex at MIT. The classrooms in which I attend classes are, of course, dominated by the lecture, and, perhaps, questions from the students. I cannot recall if Star Market plays background music; if they do, I’ve never noticed it. My dreams, in so far as I can recall them, are music-less.

You may wonder if I ever feel that I am missing out on something. I do, of course, but not in any significant way. I do not worry about missing out on music any more or any differently than I worry about missing out on understanding Chinese, or Italian, or Swahili.

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<sup>1</sup>“Finite Simple Group (of Order Two)” by Klein Four, “Fireflies” by Owl City, and “The Inner Light” performed by Picard on a ressikan flute in an episode of Star Trek: TNG

<sup>2</sup>“Wanderer” (<http://pteromys.melonisland.net/music/index.php/2> and “Stella Nova” (<http://pteromys.melonisland.net/music/index.php/1>), both written by Andrew Geng; and “The Inner Light”

<sup>3</sup>“Nonabelian”, by Chris & Meep, to the tune of Cecilia (<http://www.marypat.org/mathcamp/doc2000/songs.html#nonabelian>) and “Finite Simple Group (of Order Two)”

It is exceedingly easy for me to escape music, in as much as music is that which you might search for in your iTunes library, excluding speech-based pieces such as audio-books, podcasts, and lecture recordings. Usually, it is hard for me to recall the last time I have heard music.

However, unless you are literally deaf, it is near impossible to escape sound. Where we live, in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, it is nearly as hard to escape man-made sounds.<sup>4</sup>

When I fall asleep, and when I wake up, I usually hear the oft-present flow of steam through the pipes. I often hear banging from the pipes in my room, which I guess might be drops of condensed water impacting against the pipes at high speeds.<sup>5</sup> When I wake up to my alarm, I hear the noise of the CD spinning up. When I shower, I hear the soft screeching of water coming from the shower head, and I hear the pattering of the water against the floor. When I sit in my room, hearing neither the flowing of the steam through the pipes nor the hissing of large amounts of steam entering my heater at high speeds, I hear the low hum of my small refrigerator and its fan, and, if my laptop is on, the louder sound of it expelling hot air. If I'm near my laptop charger, I can hear it buzzing. Even if I unplug my refrigerator and turn off my laptop, if I recall correctly, the entire building hums softly. If I open my window, I sometimes hear the birds sing. More often, though, I hear the muted sound of whooshing air displaced by traffic on the street near East Campus, and the corresponding muted humming or whining of car engines. I can probably hear the thrum of air coming from the laundry room vent three floors below my window, which I hear more loudly every time I leave my dorm.

The main classroom complex at MIT is often awash with the noise of many simultaneous human conversations, especially at the times when many people are changing classes. Even in the quieter parts of the buildings, there is, I think, a constant background hum which I presume is either the air vents or, more likely, the muted sound of many large fans or air conditioners cooling massive arrays of electronics.

This past summer, I visited a pretty garden near East Campus. Once, when I visited, I stood and listened to the birds, trying to see how many different sounds I could pick out. I was able to distinguish two or three different bird sounds. In the background, though, I noticed the ever-present hum of factories or other large buildings nearby. This manufactured hum is only present in city-like areas; when I last visited Olin, one of the first things I noticed was the absence of this sound when standing outside one of their dorms. Alas, I do not recall what sounds lay under that hum. When there are no external sounds I can perceive, I still hear a faint ringing sound;<sup>6</sup> sounds are ever-present.

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<sup>4</sup>By “man-made”, I mean any sound whose cause can be directly traced to some person; if no people existed, that sound would never, or almost never, be heard from a source closely resembling its present source. There might be some edge cases where this definition fails to capture what I mean; if a parrot says “Pauli wants a cracker” or a dog barks whenever you clap your hands, are these “man-made”? But these edge cases are mostly irrelevant here.

<sup>5</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water\\_hammer#Related\\_phenomena](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_hammer#Related_phenomena)

<sup>6</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Hum#Spontaneous\\_otoacoustic\\_emissions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hum#Spontaneous_otoacoustic_emissions)