

SOOTHE OPERATOR: MUZAK AND MODERN SOUND ART SUSETTE MIN

Through more confrontational means, Los Angeles-based artist David Schafer tweaks Muzak's role as "soothe operator" by fiddling with its Stimulus Progression in the CDs *x10R.1* (*two second gap*) and *x10R.2* (*variable gap*).¹⁴ They are works of art that can be heard over a stereo or, more effectively, through a Walkman. Ironically, it was the Walkman's emergence in 1979 that momentarily disrupted the seamless stream of Muzak piping out of office public-address systems, insofar as it allowed for the creation of individual private sonic spheres within the public sphere. Schafer's purposely cacophonous CDs provoke an intense feeling of being out of place and out of sorts.

Schafer's "Times Ten Resequenced with Variable Gap" (*X10R.2*) presents a medley of well-known tunes by Muzak composers and arrangers: Les Baxter, Bert Kaempfert, Andre Kostelanetz, Paul Mauriat, and Hugo Winterhalter.¹⁵ By studying the physiological and psychological effects and applications of Muzak, Schafer's CD turns Muzak inside out, revealing its abject intentions and effects. In his selection of Muzak's greatest hits based on their varying instrumentation and moods, Schafer's CD medley begins with a chorus of haunting voices followed by a variation of overlapping melodies that become excessive, disorienting, almost nauseating. At different moments within the duration of its play (58.41 minutes to be exact), one can discern fleeting instances of recognizable TV and film tunes, from *The Godfather* theme to Frances Lai's score for *A Man and a Woman*. Catchy, saccharine tunes (better known as "champagne music") crescendo into an orchestral ensemble of violins, horns, and harps with brief breaks of applause that explode the monaural sound of Muzak. In contrast to the sense of distended time that Muzak offers, the noise in Schafer's CD is obtrusive and chaotic, condensing time to produce a claustrophobic space. Visually, I imagine the effect would resemble something like the shattering of a vase with shards of glass exploding everywhere or a stroboscopic flickering of pea-green, burnt-sienna, and pungent-yellow colors. In other words, listening to *x10R.2* is far from a pleasant experience, but it is a fascinating one.

In the spirit of the Situationists and John Cage, Schafer's tactics undermine the soothing tunes of Muzak. At the same time, Schafer, an astute operator himself, knows both how to manipulate and recede into the background. Listening to Schafer's CD will not train one to be like Mucho Mass, the character in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* who discerns Muzak's string compositions and rhythmic ebb and flow. Rather, in contrast to the low level of attention that Muzak thrives on, Schafer's CD forces one to pay attention in
57 a kind of drunken stupor. The experience of listening to Schafer's CDs is not pretty, but it pokes a hole in Muzak's seductively orchestrated operations, as it simultaneously revitalizes the ritual use of our perception.