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Global Ear: Zurich

Haunting squats and temporary spaces, Zurich's growing noise scene is an antidote to mainstream club culture

By Elia Brühlhart

Zurich is currently going through a phase where experimental music venues are in decline. Back in the late 2010s, the Longstreet Bar, hosted by Lhaga Koondhor and HOME collective, booked the likes of Arca, Mykki Blanco and Klein; since then, there has been a gaping void in underground music and club scenes. Indie and nostalgic punk concerts are meanwhile booming alongside trap nights and mainstream events promoted by large booking agencies.

However, the noise and experimental scene remains surprisingly stable and even seems to be growing. Supported by labels such as Czarnagora, venues like Magma, Brautone, Kunstraum Walcheturm and Umbo, and the Doga Shroti and Raout Cru event series, this harsh, dark and supposedly inaccessible music is attracting ever more attention. Whether as independent concerts or events overlapping with visual art, these are almost the only underground nights happening in the city.

Noise music has a certain tradition in Zurich, especially of the free improvisation kind practised by musicians like Andy Guhl, Rudolf Eb.er and Dave Phillips. The latter explains how he has always seen noise as niche music, yet has noticed a gradual but steady growth over the last 20 years. "I think it has a lot to do with this DIY aspect, people are drawn to experiences and are bored of the normative mainstream, they are looking for dedication, love and transgression, and that's what you find in this scene."

The experimental music movement in Zurich seems to be driven by precisely this kind of DIY mentality. Events in squats like Magma, interim used spaces like Farmhouse, and independent concert series, are all pushing the scene forward, experimenting with concert formats and, above all, forming international networks, often between musicians in South East Asia and Zurich.

One such event series Doga Shroti was initiated by Luc Häfliger, Julian Meier and Piero Scherer. Borrowing their format from Outer Pulsation in Taipei, a series of noise concerts founded by Chia-Chun Xu in 2019, the events take place in underpasses. Or as Häfliger puts it: "They are non-places where you don't linger, you walk through. We glitch this perception of

this space when we sit there and stay. At the same time, the people who are passing through must position themselves to it."

While Doga Shroti was never intended to be a noise series, performances tend to develop in this direction. Anyone who wants to play is invited to. The collective is always interested in people who think progressively, who want to liberate the sound from the orchestral, from the formally musical and thus expand it. "Noise is always a good fit for these places – these are harsh locations," Scherer explains. "Ultimately, it's less about the products anyway. For me, Doga Shroti is not just a concert series but a social interaction that takes place. Music is just the medium, the cohesive element."

Another important element about the scene is that it is organised in a decentralised way. Caterina De Nicola, a Zurich based noise artist working with feedback and performative improvisation, states: "It's not really just one movement that is happening – from the outside it is probably perceived as just one scene." In reality, it's a merger of diverse collectives and artists from different backgrounds, who started with music for different reasons and follow different practices. "Of course they are influencing each other also in a supportive way," says De Nicola.

After studying classical music, Miao Zhao is now most interested in performing experimental sounds on bass clarinet, or creating no-input harsh noise: abrasive, chaotic sounds generated through interconnected audio paths. She explains, "The interesting part about the so-called noise scene in Zurich is, there are not a lot of people playing harsh noise, and anyway everybody

plays differently. But it is a scene. We don't have to all be the same for it to be one. And that's what makes it interesting. And the beautiful core of it is, everybody gets a chance to perform."

Doga Shroti, Magma, Malatang, Farmhouse are more open up spaces and organise concerts where this level of participation is possible. They offer access to physical experiences of noise or related practices that need no prior knowledge or theoretical basis to be experienced in full. "I think it is a culture of inclusion," says Scherer. "Because as soon as you get into musical, tonally harmonious or classical forms a quality comparison can be made, and people can get excluded."

The topic of boundaries is regularly addressed when talking to Zurich's experimental musicians, whether it's Miao Zhao testing the physical limits of feedback, or Dave Phillips combining distorted field recordings with overdriven electronics and growled vocals. Also, De Nicola explains, "Cities are always so strict, so noise forms as a resistance to this rigidity. Zurich is built like a bubble so with our events, with our music, we're trying to pop this bubble."

As author and noise specialist Paul Hegarty once said, it "is not a genre, but it is also a genre that is multiple, and characterised by this very multiplicity". Just so Zurich's diverse but coherently connected experimental collective, which is committed to parallel political-aesthetic ideals, while breaking down boundaries to create open spaces in which inclusive sounds challenge, shake up and interact with the audience. ● pieroscherer.com



Joel Giardini performing at a Doga Shroti event in a Zurich underpass

