

Tara Rodgers. 2010. *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

**Reviewed by Elizabeth K. Keenan**

In her interview in *Pink Noises*, DJ Rekha Malhotra says, “Electronic music is such a vast landscape” (173). To one person, “electronic music” can mean the bhangra-influenced sounds that DJ Rekha produces in her sets; to another, music influenced by *musique concrète*; and to yet another, circuit bending or the use of synthesizers such as the ARP 2500 and the Buchla. “Electronic music” describes music produced in a variety of social and temporal contexts, from composer Kaffe Matthews performing subtle electroacoustic compositions in the darkest rooms she can find in order to “make music that is completely about listening and is not about watching,” (39) to feminist dance punk band Le Tigre playing their sequenced and sampled pop-oriented, feminist music to dancing indie-rock crowds. These vastly different styles, contexts, and practices come together in Tara Rodgers’s book, a collection of twenty-four interviews with women composers, producers, and practitioners of electronic music. Through these interviews, Rodgers moves fluidly between musical styles and practices in ways that illustrate the extensive involvement of women as creators of electronic music from the 1950s to the present and that make a strong counter-argument to popular and academic histories that have often relegated women’s contributions to the arena of performance.

Rodgers’s fluidity results in some revealing “juxtapositions of genre and generation” (5). The idea of juxtaposition—a word Rodgers invokes frequently—offers multiple axes for examining *Pink Noises*. By abutting musical styles throughout the book, Rodgers places all forms of electronic music within an artistic space where women’s contributions as creators hold equal value to men’s work and to each other’s work. She argues that blurring differences between high art and popular cultures forms an essential strategy for the women interviewed, who often find their influences in genres outside the ones in which they work. But, beyond raising the issue of cross-genre influence, this decidedly feminist move argues against privileging male creativity and helps to reveal the differences and commonalities of experience between women in areas that are typically gendered male. Rodgers integrates idea of juxtaposition into other elements of the book. The academic tone of the introduction, for example, departs from the direct and engaging tone of the interviews that follow, which add another layer by revealing

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contrasting modes of thinking about music, gender, and technology, often in quick succession. Also, in placing artists with long and storied histories next to less experienced ones, Rodgers offers space to consider the implications of differences in career paths between older women, who began their careers before the advent of the feminist movement, and younger women, who have reaped feminism's benefits but nonetheless face significant challenges in being accepted across the still male-centric genres that encompass "electronic music."

The question and answer structure of the book—somewhere between an oral history and a *Rolling Stone* interview—allows for crossover between academic and popular audiences. *Pink Noises* began in 2000 as a series of interviews on Rodgers's website, [www.pinknoises.com](http://www.pinknoises.com), which also contained discussion boards, how-to informational content, reviews of gear, books, and music, and many other items useful for budding composers, DJs, and technophiles. Unfortunately, Rodgers removed the companion materials to this book when beginning her book project, leaving only her own personal artist webpage. This removal seems counterintuitive for a project that aims to engage a wide spectrum of readers, and one wonders if the material's transition from a website to an academic press truly necessitates the wholesale abandonment of a lively community of women. In its new format, the interviews successfully shed light on women's contributions in ways that are valuable for academic readers, including musicologists and music theorists focusing on electroacoustic music and its compositional processes, or those thinking critically about the intersection of the electronic avant-garde with popular music; ethnomusicologists, who have grown accustomed to the mantra that women are not involved as producers in underground dance cultures; and feminist readers of all disciplinary orientations who wish to learn more about women's contributions to electronic music, past and present. In particular, for those who have encountered more recent studies of women in avant-garde electronic music, such as Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner's *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line* (2006), *Pink Noises* provides a companion volume that goes beyond the nature of a historical survey. It also offers a community-oriented companion to studies of individual women in electronic music, such as Martha Mockus's excellent biography of Pauline Oliveros, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (2008).

Rodgers begins with an introduction that draws on feminist theory, situates her work in relation to a broad spectrum of previous academic research on electronic music, and calls for a more thoroughly feminist reading of the history of electronic music. She positions *Pink Noises* as "a feminist intervention in historiography—suggesting what feminisms can do

for electronic music cultures—and it proposes what sound, as a category of critical and aesthetic analysis, can offer for feminist concerns” (2). This bold statement places far too much weight on an informal interview format that is not history per se, and on an editorial structure that relies on juxtaposition over context. Additionally, the format does not offer a clear way to sustain an analytical argument about what feminism can do for electronic music cultures, as not all the women view their music as a feminist act, or as a reflection of their personal politics; nor does the interview format necessarily offer the best means for arguing about the issue of sound as a category of critical analysis, feminist or otherwise.

The introduction shifts from this argument to rethinking the history of electronic music, in which Rodgers displays a deep familiarity with the issues historically facing both academic and popular music communities. This section, while well researched, indicates an area where detail seems to have been sacrificed for brevity. At times, Rodgers incorporates sources that do not quite distill the same idea, making conflation that undermine her otherwise strong thesis about the erasure of women from the history of electronic music. For example, she moves quickly from a discussion of feminist thought on sexual reproduction, to the idea of sound and technological reproduction, to the masculine control of the hi-fi in 1950s homes. Each of these concerns relates to the others, but the examples are so short that readers unfamiliar with the sources could have a difficult time establishing connections.

As Rodgers establishes *Pink Noises*' relationship to feminism, she argues against previous writers who have excused their inattention toward women's contributions by using the statistic that women make up only approximately ten percent of electronic music's creators and performers. Instead, Rodgers demonstrates how feminist theory can frame women's involvement in electronic music. She suggests a new interpretation of the common idea of “waves” in feminism, which has been the source of rifts constructed around generational identity within the movement:

Feminist waves might be better conceived as interacting sound waves. Sounds can be thought of as *pressure* and *movements*, doing cultural work. In the propagation of sound waves, the most audible impression may occur near the beginning of a sound's generation, but the wave reverberates through space indefinitely, continuing to intersect with and influence the trajectories of other sound waves as physical matter in ongoing interactions. Likewise, feminisms and the reactions to them do not go away but continue to reverberate in shared discursive spaces. (18)

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Not only does this conception of feminist waves as reverberating and continuing provide a radical departure from the difficulties in thinking about US feminist movements, but it also establishes a context in which to situate the subsequent interviews. This reframing of feminist waves in many ways describes the relationships between the women interviewed, who often view each other as mentors, influences, or peers. Additionally, Rodgers takes the idea of intersectionality—an element of feminism since the 1990s that refers to the relationship of gender to other elements of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality—as a founding principle. Admirably, she has put intersectionality into practice by including different types of musicians and sound artists, as well as in her questions, which acknowledge that women’s experiences of gender are enmeshed with other embodied experiences. Though they do not all belong to the same race, culture, or generation, share the same idea of feminism, use the same musical tools, or conceive of their music in the same way, the musicians have lived and made work that resounds with waves of influence.

Rather than support the introduction through argument, the interviews of *Pink Noises* support by example. The scope of topics in the interviews requires an exceptionally skilled interviewer who knows both the history of electroacoustic music and the history of electronic dance music. Rodgers—a former electronic dance music producer who earned her master’s degree in electronic music from Mills College and is now pursuing her doctorate at McGill University in communication studies—is an ideal interviewer who incorporates her depth and breadth of knowledge deftly into her lines of questioning. She brings out the women’s experiences as individuals and as members of communities; she treats them all with equal seriousness and respect; and she relies on both an engineer’s mindfulness of technology and a composer’s consideration of sound to her lines of query. Though Rodgers groups the interviews with certain commonalities in mind, she does not frequently ask the same questions of interviewees—or, at least tailors the questions to her subjects’ unique perspectives, experiences, and circumstances. As a result, the interviews are often memorable and detailed, revealing the differences between the women within the study, in terms of their compositional processes and goals, the social context of their work, and how they see their gender in relation to their music.

Rodgers groups the interviews into thematic areas: “Part 1: Time and Memory,” featuring Pauline Oliveros, Kaffe Matthews, Carla Scaletti, and Eliane Radigue; “Part 2: Space and Perspective,” featuring Maggie Payne, Ikue Mori, Beth Coleman (M. Singe), and Maria Chavez; “Part 3: Nature and Synthetics,” featuring Christina Kubisch, Annea Lockwood, Chantal

Passamonte (Mira Calix), and Jessica Rylan; “Part 4: Circulation and Movements,” featuring Susan Morabito, Rekha Malhotra (DJ Rekha), Giulia Loli (DJ Mutamassik), and Jeannie Hopper; “Part 5: Language, Machines, Embodiment,” featuring Antye Greie (AGF), Pamela Z, Laetitia Sonami, and Bevin Kelley (Blevin Blectum); and “Part 6: Alone/Together,” featuring Le Tigre, Bev Stanton (Arthur Loves Plastic), Keiko Uenishi (o.blaat), and Riz Maslen (Neotropic). Some of the groupings contain a greater diversity of music and age than others, and some contain more affinities than departures, but each section offers its own type of insights into the processes of working within electronic music scenes.

The thematic organization of the interviews offers an opportunity to observe how musical styles, technological tools, and ideological perspectives resonate between composers. Some of these groupings more successfully demonstrate the connections between the artists than others—particularly strong are Parts 3 and 5, in which the interviews resonate beautifully. “Part 5: Language, Machines, Embodiment” forms a cohesive unit for rich comparisons along lines of interactivity, uses of the body in performance, and questions of women’s relationships with technology. The grouping recalls the issues present in Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) via the “cyborgian” equipment that some of the composer/performers employ. Rodgers places the women in an order that stays true to her idea of contrasting genres and generation, but that also exposes an affinity between the women and their work. German “poem producer” Antye Greie, also known as AGF, describes her work with html code in elliptical, poetic phrases. Like AGF, Pamela Z creates music that uses words as sounds. Noted for experimental pieces that fuse movement, sound, and song, Pamela Z also raises issues of raced embodiment through her “BodySynth,” in which Z’s bodily movements control how her voice is processed. Z’s kind of embodied technology finds kinship with Laetitia Sonami’s “Lady’s Glove,” a device that Sonami first introduced as a joke but that has become a more serious instrument in her repertoire. And finally, Bevin Kelley addresses the ways that she and Kristin Erickson, her collaborator in Blectum from Blechdom, created elaborate, fantastical stories in their work and wore strange costumes, including “a two-person pair of pants attached by a stretchy column of musical farts,” in order to mask their gender (240). Here Kelley’s bold humor echoes Sonami’s subtle wit. Each of the interviews works to create a holistic picture of how women might address gender through musical technology, from humor to poetic frameworks to embodied sounds.

The range of diversity in musical styles may mean that some readers will only choose to read the interviews that appeal to their tastes; however, those readers would miss out. The interviews with Jessica Rylan and Carla Scaletti, for example, incorporate detailed technical descriptions of working with specialized synthesizers and self-designed software, respectively. At the same time, those interviews offer serious consideration of the ways that analog and digital technologies shape composers' perceptions of sound. Other interviews offer insight into issues of identity—including DJ Rekha, DJ Mutamassik, and the aforementioned Pamela Z—in ways that firmly establish the importance for an intersectional feminist intervention into naturalized male spaces, as well as one that acknowledges differences between women. And the interviews with more established musicians, such as Pauline Oliveros, Eliane Radigue, and Maggi Payne, contextualize the historical interventions that women have made into the arena of academic electronic music.

Two contrasting interviews, one with composer Annea Lockwood, the other with DJ Susan Morabito, stand out as representatives of Rodgers's ability to glean very different experiences of her interlocutors. Lockwood, whose extended "sound maps" fuse natural sounds, such as rivers, into installations and instrumental pieces, is an engaging interview subject. Lockwood's lengthy answers provide rich detail about her technical and aesthetic choices, her journey as a composer, and her influences, whether from friend Pauline Oliveros or from Gottfried Michael Koenig. Describing her decision to move away from synthetically-created sounds to her incorporation of the sounds of nature, Lockwood tells Rodgers that she soon lost the "thrill" of creating Stockhausen-esque blocks of sound from scratch:

It's a great thrill! That's amazing. But the sounds we were making from scratch seemed to me to lack life. So then of course I had to ask myself what, for me, constitutes life in a sound? The next step was, well, I won't know that until I focus on sounds which satisfy me and then figure out what satisfies me about them. And I started working with water and fire and glass, and all sorts of nontraditional sound sources. Which pulled me away from instrumental writing right away. I was looking for nontraditional things. But water was one of the most interesting to plumb because I never yet feel that I can hear every last component of any one stretch of water sound and hold it all together in my mind. (117–118)

Lockwood's interview reveals a compositional process developed over a number of years, an aesthetic buildup that begins in the creation of synthesized sounds in a lab and ends with musical material that she draws from nature, but then electronically manipulates. Through this discussion, Lockwood offers the readers insight into her thinking about sound as an element in

her compositions. Rodgers carefully guides the rest of the interview from Lockwood's recording methods for her river pieces to her return to instrumental musical compositions that incorporate objects found in nature as instruments. The result is a comprehensive view of Lockwood's music and aesthetics over her career.

If Annea Lockwood's interview offers insights into music that falls firmly into the realm of art, DJ Susan Morabito's interview, in contrast, focuses on bodies and movement on the dance floor. Rodgers's interview with Morabito offers a retrospective of her career in ways that make clear the intersection of her personal life with the history of queer dance music in New York City. Morabito's presence as one of the most highly rated DJs in the New York club scene gives concrete evidence to Rodgers's claim that much scholarship focusing on only men within gay underground dance culture has failed to incorporate a full scope of questions about gender and sexuality. Rodgers's interview with Morabito covers her personal history in detail, from the moment she recognized her own sexuality in a gay disco to her quest to become a DJ, to her rise as one of the most prominent DJs in New York City. Morabito acknowledges the difficulties of being a lesbian in a gay male space. After describing her discovery of the Saint, a legendary members-only, all men's club in New York City, Morabito reflects on her own quest to become a DJ:

My attitude was, they're not gonna hire a woman. And then he proceeded to tell me that there was a woman by the name of Sharon White who worked there. Sharon White was the first female DJ who broke into the male scene in New York, the first who had a large name and following. She really opened up the doors for all of us. She was popular and she was extremely talented. Now, for me, being twenty-two years old, by knowing that a woman already did that, that gave me hope. That made me realize it was possible. (161)

Morabito's desire to become a DJ required some level of hope that she, as a woman, could do it, not just an expectation of solidarity within the queer community. Morabito's interview covers an array of subjects, from the prevalence of crystal meth in gay clubs, to the DJ's methods of taking an audience on a musical journey, to the perceived difficulties of playing in lesbian clubs (for less pay, fewer hours, and with more requests). While Morabito offers less reflection on the specific sounds she uses—though she does focus on the effects of tempo on audiences—Rodgers nonetheless guides her through a vivid tour of queer dance culture in New York City from the early 1980s to the present. Morabito's keen assessment of the environment in which she works would be welcome in any ethnography of dance cultures.

Though *Pink Noises* accomplishes much as it endeavors to cover the

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work of women in electronic popular and art music, it falls short in a few areas that stem from the book's origins as a website. Rodgers writes that she began the project by approaching women over email for her website's launch in 2001, and she notes that the strategy behind the book is to "emphasize the substance and diversity of work that has been accomplished by women" (15). Because Rodgers's introductions to the women she interviews are minimal, one does not know how she decided which interviews would be included in the book; and since her website no longer contains the original interviews, one cannot compare or do further research. Rodgers's obscured method of interviewee choice makes it difficult to assess why certain prominent women (e.g., Hildegard Westerkamp, whose work fits Rodgers's theoretical questions about sound perfectly) are not included. Sometimes juxtapositions are not enough for readers to gain a full understanding of the relationships between women, either. Rodgers often overlooks the connections between women; more importantly, she does not reveal the structures of power that foster those connections. Casual readers might miss the institutional, cultural, and social connections between the artists. These factors, for instance, may explain why Mills College has produced so many women composers of electronic music, but it is left to the reader to connect the various Mills alumnae and professors in the book as a network or community. A reader entering from the popular music side who was familiar with Mills graduate Bevin Kelley perhaps would be puzzled by the fact that Kelley, like so many women in the book, attended Mills.

These observations, however, should not detract from the worthwhile content in *Pink Noises*. While the book's interview format does not always adequately convey the necessary context, its contribution remains significant. Rodgers addresses an unusually expansive range of topics with facility and respect to her interlocutors. Most importantly, her commitment to representing women from a variety of cultural, educational, and musical backgrounds who work in numerous genres shows both Rodgers's depth of musical knowledge and her strong commitment to feminism. Through these interviews, Rodgers makes a convincing case for reconsidering the representation of women as a central part of the history of electronic music.

### References

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