Review Essay

For an Equi-vocal Becoming
Danielle Schlomit Sofer’s Sex Sounds and Affective Politics


Chris Stover
Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University

Electronic music in any of its manifold forms—from abstract analog or digital experiments to, frankly, anything produced using recording technology—affords the possibility of new modes of intersubjective relationality, including new spatial comportments with experienced sounds, new forms of immersion in an ongoing soundscape, and of course new sounds entirely, or new kinds of transformations of existing sounds. In Sex Sounds, Danielle Schlomit Sofer stages a prolonged engagement with the sensuality and, indeed, eroticism of diverse modes of immersive, subjective experience. Sofer’s aims are ambitious and multifaceted: an interrogation of electronic music’s long-stratified creative landscape; a recuperation of creative artists often left out of (mostly academic) historical narratives; a nuanced synthesis of critical, historiographical, and music-analytic inquiry; a critique of music-theoretical claims to objectivity. All of these are woven together rigorously, creatively, and even playfully, with clever turns of phrase that in no way
reduce the political stakes of the subject matter: if the ‘serious’ versus ‘popular’
music false binary is to be broken down, then perhaps one site for doing so ought
to be how we write about music! Sofer’s work is exemplary in this respect. While
not voiced in quite these terms, what Sofer offers us in Sex Sounds has profound
implications for affect theory and—the theme of this special issue—the question
of affective politics. I’ll turn to some of these in the second half of this review.

A number of critical themes resonate through Sofer’s text, each more or less
omnipresent but rising to the surface at various points as it is thematized in a
specific context. The issue of representation looms large: who is named as an
electronic (or electroacoustic; the terms are used somewhat interchangeably)
composer, and whose repertoires count? Who, in a word, has agency? What are the
capacities and/or limits of that agency? How is power deployed, especially around
matters of consent, surveillance, ownership, appropriation, objectivity, and the relationship
between heard sounds and their various and differently traceable sources or
causes? What role does the listener play, including in ascribing or recognizing
agency and other matters? How do race, sex, gender, sexuality, ‘sexiness’, and
other intersecting factors figure in the construction of histories and genre
categories? And perhaps most important, what kinds of contexts, behaviors, and
relations have become normalized over time, and what are some ways in which
they have been (or might in the future be) resisted or subverted? As in Sofer’s book
itself, these themes will thread through what follows.

Electronic music, in Sofer’s generous definition, refers to ‘any music employing
electronics’ (p. xi). While that may seem unimpeachable, it becomes clear that the
term has not been used in that broadly encompassing sense, especially within the
academy, where a lingering ‘serious’ versus ‘popular’ music divide continues to
have currency. No surprise, the serious-popular line turns out to be roughly
coextensive with one that positions white straight cis-male composers, mostly in
Europe or North America, against a fractured coalition of Others: non-white,
LGBTQIA+, female or nonbinary, musickers the academy would resist
characterizing as composers, and those either working outside the Global North or
operating within its cracks and along its margins. It is likewise coextensive with an
imaginary line that claims to separate the objective from the sensual, as if sexuality
were nowhere present in so-called ‘serious’ music (with its emphasis on technique
and continuity with positivist research programs) and, at least implied, that
compositional rigor is absent from or unimportant to so-called ‘popular’ music
(with its connection to carnality and emotion). Among Sofer’s signal contributions
is to reveal the utter falsity of this last bifurcation, which they make clear by
beginning with examples from well-known ‘serious’ composers—Pierre Schaeffer
and Pierre Henry, Annea Lockwood, Luc Ferrari—who play explicitly with erotic
themes, and concluding with examples from well-known ‘popular’ artists—Donna
Summer, TLC, Janelle Monáe—who think very carefully about how meanings are
precisely deployed through musical structures. In order to deconstruct all of these
binaries, Sofer offers the category ‘electrosexual music’, which threads across
genre, context, intent, and time and place. (Sofer also uses the term ‘sexy music’,
which I love, but of course that term is much broader, encompassing music far beyond that which incorporates electronics.)

Sofer’s interrogation takes many forms. Insisting—contrary to the opinings of her producer-collaborators—that Donna Summer’s contributions to the melodic and harmonic structure of ‘Love to Love You Baby’ (1975) count as composition (underscored by TLC’s redeployment of Summer’s compositional material more than two decades later). Revealing how the technology of granular synthesis affords Barry Truax the possibility of bending both gender and specific erotic orientations into complex transindividual liminalities. Tracing lines of signification across a terrain of Black queer and quare expressions (see below). And much more; while it would have been valuable and rhetorically powerful for Sofer to have included at least one example of electrosexual music from the Global South, the music they do engage is far-ranging and their approaches are consistently convincing.

While I will focus in what follows on Sofer’s positive program, it is important to at least quickly stage their critical project, which is as incisive as it is nuanced. Sofer’s first case study (Chapter 1) engages ‘Erotica’, the eighth movement of Schaeffer and Henry’s 1950–1951 Symphonie pour un homme seul. Moving past the common accounts (in histories of electroacoustic music) of the composers’ experiments in ‘auditory illusion’ (p. 3) or what R. Murray Schaffer would later dub ‘schizophonia’, Sofer turns to the subject—or perhaps more germanely, the object—of Schaeffer and Henry’s experiment, the voice of an unnamed and uncredited human, likely a woman but which Sofer is careful to describe as ‘feminized’, opening the possibility that the composers may have wanted us to hear the results of their compositional machinations as feminine, regardless of the actual source. So there is a voice, which is manipulated in all number of ways but clearly recognizable. Crucially, however, ‘[i]t is not just anyone’s voice, but this woman’s voice. And who is this woman you might ask? Quite frankly, I do not know. We have no record of the performer’ (p. 10). The absence of a man’s voice intensifies the power dynamic at play:

after all, who should we presume is there to please the woman if not a man? Unlike the woman’s cooing, the man’s presence is not confirmed by his voice, then by what? Working diligently to layer together many sounds to create the movement’s intimate atmosphere, we envision the composers at the phonograph as human samplers controlling the volume, cadence, and repetition of the many simultaneous looping layers of a woman’s voice. (p. 11)

Already in this early vignette several of the themes delineated above are emerging: control, consent, agency, subjects and objects, and what Sofer will frequently characterize as the ‘game’ of electrosexual music, which we learn can progress in many ways depending on who has access to the rules of the game, or even
knowledge that it is being played (Sofer’s chapters on works by Ferrari, Robert Normandeau, and Summers address different ways in which power imbalances come into play in the ‘game’). We soon learn that the ‘absent’ male voice (who is ‘pleasuring the woman’) is precisely what Schaeffer and Henry wanted us to hear, which was further situated alongside ‘a Tahitian record’ as the exoticized scene of the imaginary encounter (‘an eroticized and exoticized colonial phantasm’; p. 13).

Consent and agency remain present as the book unfolds. Nowhere is their lack more palpable than in Sofer’s engagement in Chapter 3 with two works by Luc Ferrari, *Les danses organiques* (1973) and *Presque rien avec filles* (1989). Sofer suggests, with cause, that fundamental aspects of Ferrari’s (celebrated) compositional process raise ‘ethical suspicions regarding consent and sexual harm to such an extent that theorists and historians ought to consider suspect ethics even in works where the composer does not state outright sexual intentions’ (p. 37). Arguing specifically against a kind of detached formalism—one which privileges medium over actual content—that drives music theorist Brian Kane’s analytic orientation, Sofer insists that we must focus on the never-fully-disembodied actors who provide the source materials for electroacoustic manipulations. After all, as Sofer makes clear in their engagement with Schaeffer and Henry, the latter ‘could have transformed or distorted their source sounds into so-called objective entities that no longer serve as referents to actual, musically extrinsic objects, and yet they chose to retain some such identifying features’ (pp. 7–8). For Ferrari, the source material for a piece of ‘intimate music’ like *Presque rien avec filles*—the ‘girls’ of the title—were not only uncredited but also unaware of their role at all: ‘Ferrari’s recorded girls do not know that they have been documented or captured by the recording, and we can suppose further that he never informs them’ (p. 46). ‘Sound’, Sofer insists against Kane’s (and Ferrari’s) claims of objective detachment, ‘is of consequence precisely because of the ethics of citation and surveillance’ (p. 46). Ferrari’s intentions are clear and, frankly, creepy: it’s all a game (although only he knows it’s being played). An interview with Brigitte Robindoré, which Sofer quotes at length, is revealing: ‘Indeed, I preserve bits of intimacy, like stolen photographs. Naturally, she [referring to a woman Ferrari is recording without her knowledge] doesn’t know, and it is just this aspect that makes it even more remarkable. […] I bring it into my intimate world … and I listen to her again’ (Robindoré 1998, 15; cited on p. 47). That an auteur could be so cavalier about egregious and explicitly psycho-erotic voyeurism is Sofer’s main point of concern, about which we should probably be unsurprised and distressed in equal measure.

There is much more to cover, but I would like to turn to the theme of this special issue, affective politics, and to some of the ways Sofer’s work functions past critique, as a reparative and insistent claiming of political-ethical territory. The title of this review refers to a play on words from p. 20, where Sofer contests any purported claim that experience (of desire, in the cited passage, but it could be any experience) occurs equally or unequivocally. A parenthetical torsion of that last word into ‘un-equi-vocal-ly’ invites a consideration of ‘equal voice’, as in who,
under what Jacques Rancière (2009) would call an operative police logic, is able to have a voice and, by extension, what happens to that logic when it is disrupted by a claim of equivo-cality by one denied within the terms of a prevailing regime. For Rancière, the ground of any dissensus moment—any interruption of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ that determines whose voice is heard as language and whose is rendered unintelligible noise—begins with a declaration of equality. Rancière frames equality specifically as a method (Rancière 2016). The method begins with two axiomatic assumptions: that equality is a first principle, and that the relationship between speech and sense are constitutive of how processes of subjectification take place. The first condition has been covered over by the police logic and its stratification into those who are or are not granted a voice and what is or is not heard as intelligible speech. The second is ontologically reversed by the world of ideologies, codes, and behavioral scripts we find ourselves thrown into. In affective terms, this means that how a body can affect and be affected is conditioned by what David Panagia (2018, 31) calls ‘the centripetal tendencies of social isomorphism’. To recast Rancière’s notion in Sofer’s terms, a method of equivo-cality involves the deliberate aesthetic/affective scrambling of a prevailing code, logic, or structure in order to reveal the constructedness of the latter and, more important, to put in place a new logic and new valuation system whereby, for example, a ‘serious’/’popular’ bifurcation is no longer thinkable and the kind of creative subject that can be slotted into the ‘composer/agent’ node in the production process becomes radically democratized.

From this perspective, Annea Lockwood’s (purported) use of her own erotic voice as source material for *Tiger Balm* (1970), Alice Shields’s choreographing of sexual union ‘on her own terms’, centering on ‘her experience through sound, timbre, voice, text, lights, and physical response’ (p. 126) for *Apocalypse* (1990–1994), Annie Sprinkle’s wry feminist claiming of pornography in her 1992 *Sluts & Goddesses* (and Pauline Oliveros’s playful musical transmutation of Sprinkle’s film), and Janelle Monáe’s and THEESatisfaction’s use of music-expressive signifiers of quare subaltern identity each amounts to an unapologetically agential gesture that refuses the logics that stratify their respective practices. Let’s look briefly at each of these examples from Sofer’s study, considering what affective stakes are raised by each.

Sofer compares Lockwood’s composition favorably to that of Schaeffer and Henry (while acknowledging the persistence of a hetero-male-fantasy aural content), and offers a series of speculative hearings, including a reparative one through which ‘we can imagine championing the vocalists, who are primarily women … and whose contributions to these works are minimized in a prioritization of the composer’s “voice”’ (p. 32, emph. in original). A political-ethical bifurcation follows: ‘For Schaeffer and Henry, this means elevating the composers who script the voice in certain ways, but in Lockwood’s case power appears to be legible under a different subtext that allows listeners to attribute sexual performance to her’ (pp. 32–33); Lockwood’s composition thus reveals how women’s ‘literal and metaphorical voices remain a persistent and uncomprising presence’ (p. 33) that
insists on an agential share. It’s interesting to listen to *Tiger Balm* after reading Sofer’s chapter and to follow the particular ways in which different sonorous strata—purring ‘tiger’, gongs, woman, and so on—are juxta- and superimposed (Sofer describes this as multiple streams which we may cognitively segment in various ways, follow Dora Hanninen’s [2004] work). There’s a change of what I would call *affect valence* starting at 5:50, when the woman’s voice begins to be electronically manipulated in a way that suggests woman and tiger are converging (also suggesting to my ear that the opening sounds might have been the woman’s voice greatly slowed down). About a minute later the woman’s unmanipulated voice returns; solo transforms into duet, amplifying the protagonist’s (Lockwood’s?) autoerotic agency while also asking, as does Sofer, what ‘is the “natural” soundscape of this erotic circumstance?’ (p. 28) and, additionally, what is the meaning of the constructed one Lockwood has imagined for us? Through this flow of becomings (becoming-tiger, becoming-multiple, becoming-soundscape, becoming-orgasmic, becoming-more-than-human), capacities for relating and re-relating and new affective configurations multiply.

Shields’s *Apocalypse* amplifies these ideas by orders of magnitude. Drawing upon ancient ‘writing that represented women as powerful, knowledge, and liberated’ (p. 128), Shields’s transmedia opera takes the composer’s voice as most of its manipulated source material, and works to scramble all manner of affective codes, perhaps most importantly those which coalesced via US sexual politics in the wake of Reagan’s particular brand of prim abstinence-promoting, AIDS-dismissing conservativism. As Sofer puts it, ‘*Apocalypse* confronts sexual stigmatization by bring the classical dance moves [of the ancient Hindu Bharatanatyam and Greek and Gaelic sources] back into contact with explicit sexuality’ (p. 137), which had been excised from the dances through various processes of modernization. This amounts to what Sofer calls ‘a staged insurrection of sexual norms’ (p. 140), which, crucially, is acted out by Shields and Shields alone: ‘Shields casts herself in the principle roles of *Apocalypse*, performing every character, WOMAN, SEAWEED the sea goddess, the divine SHIVA, and even the voices of the Aeschylean chorus’ (pp. 140–141). Following a prompt from Luce Irigaray (1985, 77), this ‘reclaim[s] female sexuality from its relegated “elsewhere”’ (p. 141), by insisting both on a vivid visual display (which quite literally scrambles ‘typical phallic symbolism’ [p. 130] and the distributions of what is sensible, and how, that the latter supposes and polices) and on a ‘musically [and choreographically] rich universe in which sex is no unique act but one of life’s many pleasures’ (p. 147).

According to porn studies scholar Linda Williams (1993), Annie Sprinkle’s ‘eduporn’ work (of which *Sluts & Goddesses* is exemplary) ‘demonstrate[s] a provocative feminist agency’ that still functions wholly ‘within the conventional rhetoric and form of the [porn] genre’ (p. 166; Williams 1993, 120). As such, it functions as another powerful site of affective recoding, of scrambling the codes through which bodies and subjectivities get figured, and opening (explicitly feminized) bodies onto a proliferation of expressive relational valences. Oliveros’s improvised music for *Sluts & Goddesses* affectively transforms Sprinkle’s playful
instructional film. As Sofer’s analysis reveals, Sprinkle’s choreography, editing, and the ‘many bodily shapes and sexual tastes expressed’ by the film’s cast of characters taken together ‘appear unstaged, lifelike’; Oliveros’s soundscape, in contrast, ‘disturbs and confuses this reality, where the instrumental over-dubbing provides a closeness and clarity well beyond the usual cinematic frame by reducing the distance between performer and viewer, or rather, enhancing their intimacy’ (p. 173). The effect, palpable upon viewing/listening, is a kind of multidimensional experiential orientation where one feels oneself at once both inside and outside the action—voyeur and actor (or student and participant) at the same time. This underscores what Sofer locates in Sprinkle and Oliveros’s collaboration as a politically charged continuity between pornography and (quoting Constance Penley) ‘avant-garde revolutionary art, populist struggles, or any kind of countercultural impulses’ (p. 175; Penley 1996, 312). Lest this be thought of as a tenuous claim, I would submit that it is precisely on the terrain of affective politics that the connection plays out. The insertion of revolutionary art (which I would argue Oliveros’s music indubitably exemplifies) into a pre-scripted and pre-edited (and cheeky) pedagogical porn video in order to enact a transformation of a viewer’s voyeuristic detachment to erotic intimacy amplifies the subversive potential that, its creators seem to be implying, is always already present in a certain kind of porn expression. If, following Sofer’s analysis of Shields, sex is ‘no unique act but one of life’s many pleasures’ (something porn seems to insist on in its staging of sex as always immediately available) and therefore something—in all its consensual and noncoercive forms—to be thought of as basic to human existence, then in Sprinkle’s staging it has transgressive potential as a site of specifically female pleasure and agency (notably in the ‘megagasm’, which according to Sofer and Williams, ‘deliberately invokes comparisons to men in order to surpass and outperform them’; p. 174) and in Oliveros’s funnels that agency into a (virtual and electronically enhanced) intimate relation-space.

One last, slightly longer, vignette. Among the many fruitful scholarly duets Sofer plays in Sex Sounds is a dialogue with posthuman sound studies theorist Alexander Weheliye. While beyond the bounds of this review to pursue very far, the implications of Sofer’s work for critical posthumanism studies ought to lead in many fruitful future directions. But to stay close to the topic at hand, as we have seen so far, electrosexual music might be an ideal space for contesting ‘liberal version[s] of selfhood’ and ‘the hegemonic Western conception of humanity as a heuristic category’ (p. xlvii; Weheliye 2002, 23; Weheliye is in turn invoking Katherine Hayles’s [1999] groundbreaking work in posthumanist theory). As philosopher Chiara Bottici has argued, turns to politically valent feminist praxis (notably in the anarchafeminism Bottici [2022] theorizes and champions) are precisely sites for refiguring existing accounts of what it means to be human and imagining new ontological formulations that might be put in their place. (Here I am aligning with a strain of Deleuzian thought that figures ontology as a relational practice of making sense within an affectively-constituted world; see Cullen 2021.) We come to hear in Lockwood’s Tiger Balm and in Sprinkle and Oliveros’s collaboration that bodies are not objects but processes and that bodies
and ecologies are irreducible: we are ‘bodies in plural’; ‘the environment is us’ (Bottici 2022, 19; 21). And in Apocalypse and Truax’s 1992 Song of Songs we can experience Bottici’s claim, derived from theorist/activist Emma Goldman ([1910] 2011), that life is not a ‘compartmentalized being’ but functions as ‘a unity that pulsates through difference’ (73). Both of these ideas play out in the closing chapters of Sex Sounds, where Sofer turns to Black queer feminist musical expressions by Janelle Monáe (including in collaboration with Esperanza Spalding) and THEESatisfaction’s Stas THEE Boss.

Sofer offers many examples of ‘how women of color’s craft is embedded in technology’, but how, so often, ‘we are left with a trace of women’s presence without explicit acknowledgement that their labor is also innovative’ (pp. xli–xlii). Such innovation is the focus of much of the second half of the book, and nowhere more than in Sofer’s engagement with the artists named just above. First, though, we should turn back to Weheliye again, on Afro-modernism, humanity, sonic barriers or boundaries, and race as a concept that is ‘constantly being (re)constructed’ (p. l).

Weheliye clarifies that all sound production is technological, and that there is political force in lingering on the ‘interplay between the ephemerality of music … and the materiality of the audio technologies/practices’, which ‘provides the central, nonsublatable tension at the core of sonic Afro-modernity’ (l; Weheliye 2005, 7). Sofer pivots carefully from Weheliye’s Afro-modernist staging of the play between ephemerality and materiality that characterizes all musical practice (but which carries the possibility for dissensual reworkings into critical political valences in minoritarian contexts) to strategies for retooling histories and ongoing practices posed by Sara Ahmed in order to strategically ‘create relationships with others that are more equal’ and ‘find ways to support those who are not supported … by social systems’ (p. li; Ahmed 2016, 1). A primary site for Sofer, which clarifies how a method of equi-vocality can function in practice and also points toward future affective refigurations (see just below) is what they dub (following a prompt from journalist Carrie Battan [2012]) the ‘wobble warp’ trope. Sofer identifies the ‘wobble warp’ trope as a signifier employed by a range of artists ‘aesthetically linked … in their intergeneric electronic inclusivity as well as their reception as queerly presenting musicians’ (p. 250). It occurs, Sofer demonstrates, very subtly in Monáe’s 2013 ‘It’s Code’, moving by so quickly as to be nearly unnoticeable, but doing potent affective work in conjunction with characters in Monáe’s music video. Conversely, it is one of the most salient aural features of THEESatisfaction’s 2012 ‘Enchantruss’, operating as the textural layer upon which the song unfolds. In a striking inversion to, say, what becomes of Brian Wilson’s voice in Monáe’s later (2018) ‘Dirty Computer’ (in which a ‘pure’ overdubbed human expression is gradually made posthuman via electronic manipulation), we only hear the ‘pure’ voices at the very end of the track.

In the second analyzed track by each of these artists, the wobble warp is shown to be even more fully embedded into the song’s semantic field. In Monáe and
Spalding’s ‘Dorothy Dandridge Eyes’ (2013) it becomes a signifier for a ‘quare visual exchange’ (p. 254; also, as Sofer describes, present in the ‘It’s Code’ video). In Stas THEE Boss’s ‘Before Anyone Else’ (2017) it moves from background texture to foreground: ‘Stas doubles her own rap in thirds, and phrases are often punctuated with a “wobble”’ (p. 255). As Sofer illuminates in her Figure 12.3 (p. 256), this is underscored in the closing line of the second verse, ‘now I drink mad beers, quandries for sad queers’, with a quick ensemble drop and palpable wobble emphasizing the last two syllables. Critical theorist Shanté Paradigm Smalls (2018, 123) describes the ‘temporal, cognitive, and affective disruption’ that queer hip hop makes possible, suggesting lines of politically productive convergence as she stages the ‘expansiveness, deconstruction, inclusivity, mixology, and creativity’ (124) through which both queerness and hip hop operate. The ‘wobble warp’, read this way, becomes an expressive conduit between these convergent aesthetic (in Rancière’s disruptive sense) worlds that Sofer identifies as ‘quare’ (referring to E. Patrick Johnson’s [2005] formulation, as a intersectional expression of queer, Black, and US southern identity; note that Sofer focuses on the first two terms). But as Sofer makes clear, it’s also code, a subtle interpellation signifying inclusion in a doubly subaltern culture. Sofer is careful with this last point: while on one hand they are ‘hesitant to expose this code, to threaten a queerly cordoned-off hip-hop aesthetic and possibly invite others to exploit it, take it away, appropriate it’, on the other hand they underscore its mutability, suggesting how ‘as with any code, once discovered, it modulates, shifts positions, becomes altered such that it never be fully decipherable’ (p. 250).

Affect is pre-individual: it is produced by bodies in relations, but its circulation and stickiness is what constitutes those bodies through ongoing processes of subjectification. The way it constitutes bodies, according to the strand of affect theory that originates with Baruch Spinoza and flows through Gilles Deleuze to innumerable theorist-practitioners, is by enacting changes of valence: changes in bodies’ capacities to re-relate in next conjunctive events (Stover 2021). A change of valence, then, is a change in one’s relational orientation. Art practices (as sites of the production of affects and percepts, as Deleuze and Félix Guattari [1994] put it) are, fundamentally, sites where new forms of relational-affective conjunctions become imaginable, which is perhaps one reason specifically queer, feminist, and BIPOC art practices function as politically valent sites of liberatory potential. Affect matters. The positive program Sofer offers in Sex Sounds (beyond their crucial and timely critiques), ultimately points to an array of paths forward, imagining manifold peoples to come, anticipated within the textures of electrosexual sounds and the (post)human agents that enact them.

References


