

JOSEPH NECHVATAL¹

OPENING PERFORMANCE ORCHESTRA'S NOISE OF ART

ABSTRACT

This historical review of the intonarumori noise music machines of Futurist painter/composer Luigi Russolo, along with a chronicle of known recordings of the intonarumori, contextualizes the Czech ensemble Opening Performance Orchestra's

recording: *The Noise Of Art. Works for Intonarumori*.

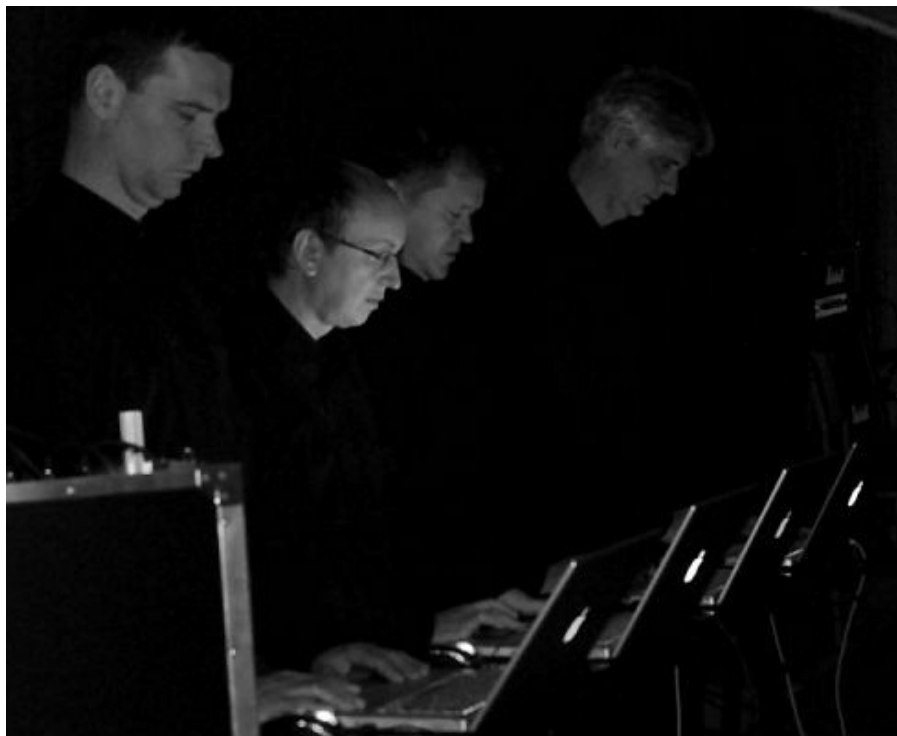
KEY WORDS: intonarumori, Opening Performance Orchestra, noise of art

¹ Joseph Nechvatal's contemporary art and theory practice engages in the fragile wedding of image production and image resistance. His Open Humanities Press book *Immersion Into Noise* (2011) has been re-published in a second edition in 2022. His book of essays *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* (2009) was published by Edgewise Press. He has also published three books with Punctum Press: *Mínóy* (ed.) (2014), *Destroyer of Naïvetés* (2015) and *Styling Sagaciousness* (2022). His audio works, *Selected Sound Works* (2021) and *The Viral Tempest* (2022), have been published by Pentiments. www.nechvatal.net.

INTRODUCTION



Luigi Russolo and Ugo Piatti with noise machines, Milan, 1913.
Reproduced in *L'Arte dei rumori* (*The Art of Noises*), 1916. Public Domain.



Members of Opening Performance Orchestra among
Apple Computers (circa 2012) © Opening Performance Orchestra.

Noise is a strong aspect within the ambience of everyday urban life, even as the heterogeneous *art of noise* is to the Western world a rare cultural treasure.² It was not through a chance operation that John Cage, whose sections of *The future of music: Credo*³ appear derived from *L'arte dei rumori* (*The Art of Noises*),⁴ came to be one of the first musicians in the mid-20th century⁵ to be re-interested in the radical noise music⁶ of Luigi Russolo—the Futurist painter/composer⁷ born in Italy in 1885 who would come to find traditional melodic music restricting, and so envision noise music as its expanded⁸ alternative. It was by Cage *hearing* Russolo's 1913 manifesto *The Art of Noises* delivered as a talk at a meeting (either in 1939 or 1940) of the Seattle Arts Society. In that magnificent manifesto,⁹ which Russolo addressed to fellow Futurist composer Francesco Balilla Pratella, he describes the theory of *intonarumori*: Russolo's noise music-making machines.¹⁰ Some of the re-creation/re-use of *intonarumori* instruments in the later 20th and early 21st century will be discussed here by focusing on the recorded accomplishments of a three-year collaborative project by Czech ensemble Opening Performance Orchestra (OPO).

² In order for music to be dissonant with contemporary consumer culture, it must risk its very identity as music. The art of noise is the embarrassingly spangled bimbo of art, even though it is god: the creator of all art and music, its underlying principle, its first cause, its all-encompassing frame. See: Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion Into Noise* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2022).

³ John Cage, "The future of music: Credo," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 3-6.

⁴ First expanded by Russolo into a book form in 1916. See: Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 1. (Originally published in English by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins' Something Else Press in 1967 as a *Great Bear Pamphlet*. The translation was made by fellow Fluxus artist Robert Filliou).

⁵ Another being *Musique concrète* maestro Pierre Schaeffer, who was himself greatly influenced by reading Russolo's *L'arte dei rumori* manifesto. Schaeffer's *Musique concrète* movement demonstrated that Noise Music is already in the air: in every city street, in every rustling tree, in us one and all.

⁶ Noise Music in general traffics in dissonance, atonality, distortion, incidental composing, etc. Whereas psychedelia was about transcending the body, most noise music posits a muscular transcendence by way of a punishing physicality that goes hand-in-hand with minimal aesthetics. The history of Noise Music begins with Luigi Russolo. See: Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum International, 2007).

⁷ Luigi Russolo, in 1909 met the Futurist artists Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà and the following year, after his encounter with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, signed both the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* and the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*. Afterwards, he participated in all Futurist soirees and exhibitions. His mature Cubist-influenced Futurist canvases drew primarily on the examples of Anton Giulio Bragaglia's Futurist *Fotodinamismo* (photo-dynamism) and Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography.

⁸ For example, distortion and loudness are positive criteria for rock electric guitar (for example, Jimi Hendrix), shoegaze, power electronics, grunge, post-rock, heavy metal, no wave post-punk, and hardcore punk music; as well as for much of noise music.

⁹ In it, Russolo describes the passage through history from silence to sound to the noise-sounds of musical noise.

¹⁰ The original *intonarumori* were boxes of varying sizes and heights fitted with large metal speakers. Russolo and his assistant Ugo Piatti finished them for Russolo's first full scale concert series in 1914, where Russolo and Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti, the Italian poet, editor, art theorist, and founder of the Futurist movement, performed them at the London Coliseum, in Milan at the Theater Dal Verme and in Genoa at the Politeama Theater. In 1917, Russolo's performance in the *Gran Concerto Futuristico* in Milan, that used 18 *intonarumori*, was met with strong disapproval from the audience.

I.

Contextualized as art, noise music takes noise itself as a crucial aspect of the music and Russolo was the first composer who consciously utilized noise within the framework of music. Russolo's *intonarumori* had their premiere on June 2nd, 1913 in the city of Modena at Theater Storchi, where he introduced a *scoppiatore* (blaster). Russolo's term *intonarumori*, first used by him in a 1913 article in *Lacerba*, an Italian literary journal based in Florence closely associated with the Futurist movement, as *apparecchi intonarumori* (noise intoner instruments)¹¹—at its peak a 27-member family of acoustic noise musical instruments¹²—that, by controlling dynamics and frequencies by means of a mechanical crank, each make a different set of noises needed to create his *reti di rumori* (networks of noises) music. The 'instruments' description soon became assumed, and thus *intonarumori* became the accepted term (for both single instruments and the type of instrument), which can be translated into English as *noise intoners*—and so also as *noise droners*, because to intone is to drone or hum. So the *intonarumori* term can even be translated as *noise hummers* and/or *noise droners*—due to their specific structural attribute of persistence (though sometimes *intonarumori* is somewhat misleadingly translated simply as *noise organs* and/or *noise makers*). Here I will adhere to the original Italian word *intonarumori*, as it is used in the titled of the central work under consideration: *The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori* by Opening Performance Orchestra.



The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori (Sub Rosa LP/CD cover)

© Opening Performance Orchestra.

¹¹ Luciano Chessa, *Luigi Russolo, Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 232.

¹² Including the *ululatori*, *rombatori*, *crepicatori*, *scroppicatori*, *scoppiatori*, *gorgogliatori*, *ronzatori* and *sibilatori* (howlers, roarers, cracklers, rubbers, bursters, gurglers, hummers and whistlers).

Opening Performance Orchestra is a seven-member laptop noise band based in Prague, active since 2006 in the creation of digital noise music they call *fraction music*: the results of audio decomposition and destruction brought about by digital sound processing. In 2013, they were inspired by an invitation to play at the Mini Marathon of Electronic Music that was dedicated to the centenary of Russolo's high-minded *The Art of Noises* manifesto. Created for the festival was the first version of their composition *The Noise of Art* that used four computers, three intonarumori (that they had built), the voice of a narrator, and a video component. To do so, they undertook rebuilding some of Russolo's intonarumori¹³ which allowed for the modification of tone and pitch of non-representational 'pure' noise. All of Russolo's intonarumori were long lost or destroyed and of which no technical documentation survived apart from a few period photographs and a drawing.¹⁴ The sounds of a 78 rpm record made by Luigi Russolo and his brother Antonio Russolo in 1921 are the only surviving sounds of the original intonarumori.¹⁵

Luigi Russolo sustained serious head injuries during his participation in World War I (somewhat ironically from the loud blast of a hand grenade) and after a long convalescence left Italy and moved to Paris where he carried out elaborations on the intonarumori. In 1921 he held three concerts in Paris with an orchestra of twenty-seven intonarumori.¹⁶ These intonarumori concerts caused fierce controversy, but also greatly impressed the French composer of 'organized sound,' Edgard Varèse, who would later discuss Russolo and the intonarumori with John Cage in the United States.

II.

The prototype of Opening Performance Orchestra's first intonarumori set was made by Milan Guštar; a designer, programmer and composer. Subsequently, three intonarumori were built by Jan Kolář, with audio consultation from Luciano Chessa and Werner Durand. The use of those intonarumori resulted in the publishing of the aforementioned double LP/CD *The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori* (Sub Rosa, 2019) credited as by Blixa Bargeld, Luciano Chessa, Fred Möpert, and Opening

¹³ I say Russolo's intonarumori, albeit Russolo was greatly assisted by Ugo Piatti.

¹⁴ In the wake of the turbulent changes in society and art alike following World War I, ideas of the Italian Futurists would remain forgotten for decades.

¹⁵ Antonio Russolo and Luigi Russolo, *Corale* (1921), in *5 Seminal Italian Futurism Recordings (1921-31) by Luigi & Antonio Russolo / Filippo Tommaso Marinetti* (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2012); Antonio Russolo and Luigi Russolo, *Serenata* (1921), in *5 Seminal Italian Futurism Recordings (1921-31) by Luigi & Antonio Russolo / Filippo Tommaso Marinetti* (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2012).

¹⁶ Climaxing in the rumorarmonio (a.k.a. The Russolo Phone) which combined several types of intonarumori with a rudimentary keyboard. This was presented to the Parisian public at the opening of a Futurism art exhibition at Galerie 23 in 1929 by Edgard Varèse, who planned to bring it into production. Unfortunately, those plans fizzled and Russolo turned his attention back to his painting and occult philosophical interests. In 1931 he moved to Tarragona in Spain, where he continued to study occult philosophy and practice yoga. In 1933 he returned to Italy's Lake Maggiore where he died in 1947.

Performance Orchestra.

The excess of its heterogeneous energy—both sensually provocative and intellectually perverse—is very enjoyable; as is its attention to sonic detail. This recorded homage to Russolo follows in the wake of several intonarumori recreations, one of which was used in Pierre Henry's playful *Futuristie* LP that was recorded by Musique Française d'Aujourd'hui in 1980. It documents a live recording of the world premiere of *Futuristie* that took place at Théâtre national de Chaillot on October 16, 1975 in Paris. That LP is basically the source tapes as realized that year at Studio Apsome. It was remastered in 2000 at Studio Son/Ré and published under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Communication and the SACEM Foundation for Musical Communication in cooperation with Radio France. It was modified and re-released by Philips in 2001.

2002 saw the Japanese Intonarumori Orchestra recorded homage to Russolo's intonarumori released on Off Site with a CD titled *Intonarumori Orchestra* that documents their performance of replica intonarumori recorded live at Tama Art University Museum in Tokyo on February 24th that year. The six intonarumori machines they used were produced in 1986 as a project of Kuniharu Akiyama at Tama Art University. The recording is excellent in its mercurial variety, with even some of Intonarumori Orchestra's tracks, like *All about Something 2* (14:07) and *Disk* (9:17), so spare and so subtle they verge on drifting quietude.

2013 brought us the impressive and dynamic double LP *Orchestra Of Futurist Noise Intoners* (Sub Rosa) that assembles 16 versions of the intonarumori (each with a specific timbre) to play all together in an orchestra, as Russolo had intended. These sixteen intonarumori—the first complete reconstruction of Russolo's earliest orchestra—were created by Luciano Chessa in 2009 so as to perform for the first time Russolo's score fragment *Risveglio di una città* (Awakening of a City) (1:12). The result is a short but majestic and gorgeous ocean of noise that is philologically and physically exhilarating. The LP also contains original compositions written for intonarumori by Chessa and other experimental composers. Many of those rather capricious, explosive and robust compositions include the human voice, yet I felt the painful imperfection of humanity most palpably in the melancholy grandeur of Pauline Oliveros' instrumental track, *Waking The Intonarumori* (5:45).

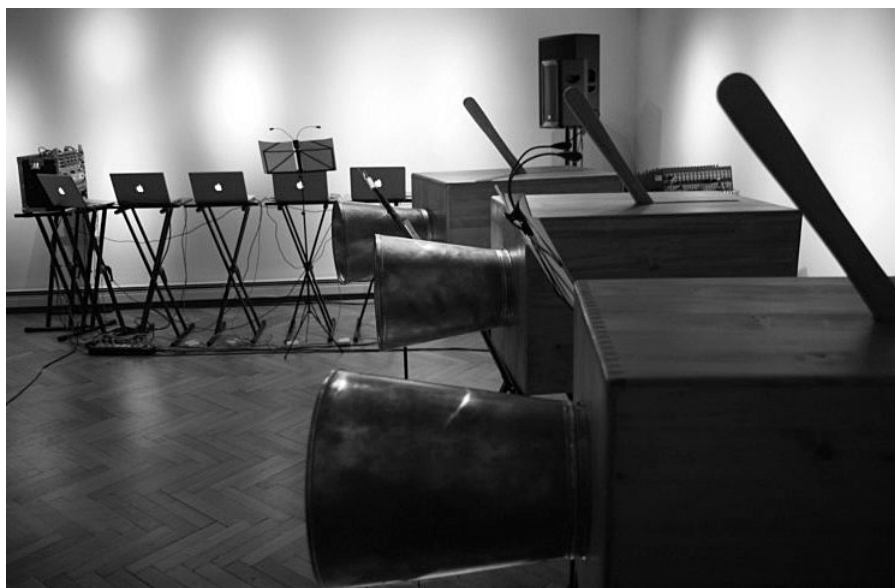
All of these impure (from a pure noise perspective)¹⁷ recordings remind me that Russolo in *The Art of Noises* theorized *against* the *inclusion* of noise into musical composition, yet he himself did so when collaborating with his brother Antonio Russolo on *Corale* (1921) and *Serenata* (1921). Russolo believed that as our ears adapted to industrialized environments, music can become fuller with dissonant sounds that challenge what was traditionally considered musical. He also insisted on the harmonic aspect of noise: "Every noise has a pitch, some even a chord, which predominates

¹⁷ For more on this dichotomy, see: Torben Sanglid, "The Aesthetics of Noise," *Ubu Web Archive*, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>.

among the whole of its irregular vibrations.”¹⁸ Indeed, Russolo wanted “to give pitches to these diverse noises, regulating them harmonically and rhythmically”¹⁹ so this assertion runs into a contradiction with OPO’s motto: which is *no melody no rhythm no harmony*.

Russolo, who was, yes, at some point politically a Fascist,²⁰ but for all of his adult life an avuncular occultist—as Luciano Chessa exhaustively details in his revealing book *Luigi Russolo, Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult*²¹—resists assimilation in an age in which cultural resistance is usually rendered neutral by the culture industry itself. But most binary positions of in-and-out (of the noise category) fade quickly when thinking about noise music. For example, Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* (1825) sounded like noise to his audience at the time of its creation. Beethoven’s publishers persuaded him to remove it from its original setting as the last movement of a string quartet. He did so, replacing it with a sparkling *Allegro*, and they subsequently published it separately. Would anyone think of Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* as noise now? Not likely.

III.



Opening Performance Orchestra’s set up at *Ostrava Days: Minimarathon of Electronic Music*, August 2013 at Galerie výtvarného umění v Ostravě, photo courtesy OPO archive.

OPO’s *The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori* is interesting not only because its noise music speaks to our instinctual and chaotic Id, or because its recording technology is

¹⁸ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise. Futurist Manifesto* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), 9.

¹⁹ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 9.

²⁰ Luciano Chessa, *Luigi Russolo, Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 8-9.

²¹ Luciano Chessa, *Luigi Russolo*.

better, cleaner, brighter; producing crisper noises than on the previous recordings, but because the *musical* results are really riveting. Its seven compositions²² are some of the best examples of what Jacques Attali, in his seminal book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, stated about music: that it is basically the organization of noise.²³

The first CD track, from 2017—*The Noise Of Art* (11:30)—features the grinding sounds of three of OPO's replica intonarumori machines—the ululatore, stropicciatore, and crepitatore—mixed with the English language reading of excerpts from *The Art of Noises* by Blixa Bargeld; founding member of the industrial music group Einstürzende Neubauten. Bargeld starts the track by reading slowly and fully from Russolo: "In antiquity there was only silence. In the nineteenth century, with the invention of the machine, Noise was born. Today, Noise triumphs and reigns supreme over the sensibility of men."²⁴ It, along with the second track that replaces the voice with violin—*Trio No. 3* (5:30)—demonstrates the palette of sounds that the OPO intonarumori can produce. *Trio No. 3* is so crisply noisy that it would have been a shame to pester its *bête noire* uproar with specific narrative meaning. From there, OPO steps back for track three, *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too Loud a Solitude, 8:14). It is composed by the previously mentioned Luciano Chessa, who plays with time, pressure and texture in a less drone-like way than OPO. The pleading stereo separation here gives the *Příliš hlučná samota* track a conversational quality that dances in your head even while its flagrant sensuality cannot go undetected.

Opening Performance Orchestra delicately drones in again with the 12-minute track four—*Trio n°2* (12:00) from 2016—that has a scratchy vibe to it thanks to a violin played by David Danel. Track five is *Neue Horizonte* (6:30) by Fred Möpert from 2017—who adds in strong sounds of a theremin, played flamboyantly by Martina Potůčková, and a bit of his human voice narration as the continually mounting noise music pushes the energy up and over the maximalist edge.

Track six, performed by OPO, is a 2013 sybaritic, grinding composition by Blixa Bargeld called *The Mantovani Machine, Pt. 3—Gas* (14:30), made dramatic by Bargeld's addition of punctuating brief silent pauses. Its sense of start-and-stop overwhelming overdrive is not in the least irritating or oppressive, but rather somehow empowering. It wonderfully reverses John Cage's *4:33*, the famous 1952 composition of silence where the audience experiences brief moments of ambient noise.

A bit more classical but in no way short on flair and audacity, I loved the inclusion of the violin, and especially the piano played by Miroslav Pudlák, in track seven—*Opening Performance Orchestra: Futurist Soirée* (20:00) from 2016. That mix of noise hummers with classical musical instruments bristles with particularity and recalls for me Luigi Russolo and Antonio Russolo's two hybrid works.²⁵ The track also

²² It also includes a four-page booklet.

²³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 4.

²⁴ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 1.

²⁵ Antonio Russolo and Luigi Russolo, *Corale* (1921); Antonio Russolo and Luigi Russolo, *Serenata* (1921).

adds in splendid Italian language narration by Chessa that includes text from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909)²⁶ and from Francesco Balilla Pratella's *Manifesto of Futurist Musicians* (1910).²⁷

IV.

The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori confirms Russolo's words from *The Art of Noises* that, "We enjoy creating mental orchestrations of crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub and shuffle of crowds, the variety of din from the stations, railways, iron foundries, spinning mills, printing works, electric power stations and underground railways."²⁸ Opening Performance Orchestra here immerses us into the noise of the historical avant-garde—the historical roots of noise art—but also into its present: that great present that is opening up the world of art music to previously unheard sounds that reflect the artistic depths of our age. Perhaps that overwhelming excess of information helps in us realizing that the history of 20th century art music needs to be rewritten, or at least expanded, so as to put greater emphasis on artistic experiments of musicians and artists who were neither appreciated nor encouraged during their lives.

The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori is a vehicle for just such an historically conscious project, while also a possible path for self-transcendence into a kind of timeless dream world of fertile noise. For it shows us that the future is already here—and like noise music, that future is lavishly new and thrilling old—like whistling winter winds making love in a rusty can. □

²⁶ Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 8-9.

²⁷ Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism*, 111, 113, 157.

²⁸ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bargeld, Blixa., Luciano Chessa, and Fred Möpert. *Opening Performance Orchestra. The Noise Of Art: Works for Intonarumori*. Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2019. LP and CD.
- Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Große Fuge, Op. 133*. New York City: Columbia Records, 1957. LP.
- Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.
- Chessa, Luciano. *Luigi Russolo, Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Hegarty, Paul. *Noise/Music: A History*. London: Continuum International, 2007.
- Henry, Pierre. *Futuristie*. Paris: Musique Française d’Aujourd’hui, 1980. LP.
- Intonarumori Orchestra. *Intonarumori Orchestra*. Tokyo: Off Site, 2002. CD.
- Nechvatal, Joseph. *Immersion Into Noise*. London: Open Humanities Press, 2022.
- Russolo, Antonio and Luigi Russolo. *Corale (1921) 5 Seminal Italian Futurism Recordings (1921-31) by Luigi & Antonio Russolo / Filippo Tommaso Marinetti*. Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2012. Digital download.
- Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of Noises*. New York: Pendragon Press, 1986.
- Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of Noise: Futurist Manifesto*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967.
- Sanglid, Torben. “The Aesthetics of Noise.” *Ubu Web Archive*. Accessed February 22, 2022. <http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>.
- The Orchestra Of Futurist Noise Intoners. *The Orchestra Of Futurist Noise Intoners*. Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2013. LP.
- Tisdall, Caroline, and Angelo Bozzolla. *Futurism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.