



The Wall-Shaking Delights of Stockholm’s Experimental Drone Scene

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By Samuel Tornow

For the last several years, a series of low drones have been echoing out from Stockholm, Sweden, and captivating experimental music fans from around the world. Artists like Kali Malone, Ellen Arkbro, Caterina Barbieri, and Maria W. Horn are releasing some of the most compelling drone and electro-acoustic music around, all from the Swedish capital. The emergence of these artists isn’t coincidental. That a relatively small country can be home to so many successful experimental musicians has much to do with decades of state-funded institutions and the bonds between old avant-garde legends and the scene’s fresh faces.

It’s impossible to talk about any experimental music scene in Stockholm without mentioning the importance of state-funded art institutions and the refurbishing of old industrial spaces. Fylkingen, a state-subsidized chamber music society and performance space founded in 1933, played a crucial role in shaping the scene’s broader arc; a regional hub for avant-garde music, it went on to gain worldwide recognition in the 1960’s and ’70s, hosting all the greats: Xenakis, Morton Subotnick, Ravi Shankar, Terry Riley, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and La Monte Young, to name a few.

Maria W. Horn, composer, and co-founder of the drone label Xkatedral with Kali Malone, regards these shows as a critical launch point for the community. “In 1976, the Modern Museum in Stockholm organized the eleven days long Dream Music Festival with music from La Monte Young, Catherine Christer Hennix, and Terry Riley, among others,” said Horn. “Folke Rabe and Catherine Christer Hennix are examples of two composers that were based in Stockholm during this era, an era that in so many ways [has] been fundamental for the second wave of drone music that we are seeing now.”

One of the most radical things Fylkingen did for the scene was the simple act of opening its doors, offering studio space, classes, instruments, and a gathering place for anyone who paid the small membership fee. For Kali Malone, a drone artist originally from the States who has been residing in Sweden and briefly worked at the venue, the inclusive and long-lasting nature of Fylkingen is pivotal to Stockholm’s creative success.

“The ability to have a venue space in the community that isn’t constantly changing, I think, has created a lot of security and privilege in the community,” says Malone. “Whereas in the States, you have underground venues that are constantly being evicted or the neighborhoods getting gentrified, and they can’t afford the rent. So we see that, here, with experimental music and art having these places that are able to stay and be generational, you can actually have a written sense of history and camaraderie amongst multiple generations and a lot of education that happens.”

Next door to Fylkingen is the state-funded studio space Elektronmusikstudion (EMS), a place Swedish composer Ellen Arkbro finds particularly welcoming. It’s a place where anyone can enter and be greeted with outstretched arms and welcoming faces regardless of skill level.

“You can walk in from the street and ring the doorbell and say, ‘Hey, what are you doing here? I’m interested,’” said Arkbro. “And then you get invited immediately and just pay for the courses, and then you get to book the studios for a lifetime without paying. I mean, it’s ridiculous. You don’t have to know a bunch of things about strange music. You can just be curious, and then you’re a part of it.”

Ideologically, the Stockholm scene differs from its international counterparts because of its foundation, which is built on trust and a desire to help one another, rather than competing for global exposure. According to Malone, most of her peers don't own microphones, monitors, or the instruments they record with; it's all loaned out by EMS via a trust-based system. Additionally, much of the code that artists create with SuperCollider, a programming language and environment used by many drone musicians in Stockholm, is open source and available for all to use. Daniel Karlsson, a drone artist who makes most of his music algorithmically, is one of the key players in the movement.

“[Daniel] has a lot of ideological texts around the possibility of sharing code. He's really impacted our community in this way of sharing, teaching one another, and not keeping secrets for yourself.”

The combination of free educational classes, institutions like EMS, Fylkinen, and groups such as Xkatedral and the Sthlm Drone Society—a collective of artists interested in creating long-duration drone concerts in non-traditional venue spaces like industrial warehouses, churches, and mine shafts—provides artists with fertile ground to harvest their skills and make life-long connections. To navigate the rich, wall-shaking world of Stockholm's drone scene, Bandcamp has compiled a list of seven key releases.



Catherine Christer Hennix

The Deontic Miracle: Selections from 100 Models of Hegikan Roku

Perhaps no Swedish-born musician is as influential to the modern drone scene in Stockholm than Hennix, a pivotal figure in early synth and tape music. The composer honed her skills in Sweden and began running with Fluxus composers such as Henry Flynt and La Monte Young in the '60s and '70s. After returning to Sweden in 1971 following a period in New York, she began composing for a large ensemble, taking inspiration from Young's *Theatre of Eternal Music* recordings. The broad ensemble idea was quickly abandoned and eventually whittled down to a trio and arrived at its final form, The Deontic Miracle. Thanks to Hennix's direction, the group's music inspired a generation of composers. “[Hennix's] sound is so very specific,” explains Arkbro, “it's that low drone, these textures that arise in the very low-frequency area. When you hear it, it sounds very harsh, but then you get used to it, and it's super beautiful. It's been influential to me personally.”

The Deontic Miracle: Selections from 100 Models of Hegikan Roku begins with a squealing renaissance oboe that swoops around the mix like a hawk diving in for prey, as the delay, which Hennix uses to build complex chords, echoes on infinitely underneath the leading string voice. At times, the sinister instrumentation sounds like it could reasonably soundtrack a kaiju film starring Mothra or Dogora, its foundation constantly undermined by earth-shattering drones.

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