



How to Make Darkness Visible: Drone Records

In 1993, **Drone Records** founder Stefan Knappe began releasing 7" records of experimental, dark ambient, and pseudo-industrial music. Over time his label has served as a catapult for new experimental musicians and as a playground for artists interested in exploring the boundaries between music and pure sound. Though the label's name suggests the frozen, often academic compositions of musicians like Phill Niblock and LaMonte Young, the reality of the matter is quite different. Often far more tonal, lush, and musically dynamic than most drone music is, records released on Knappe's label invite comparisons to the bleakness of Zoviet France, the synthesizer-rich compositions of early Tangerine Dream, and the heavy sounds of Bass Communion.

Knappe started Drone by releasing records from **Maeror Tri**, a dark ambient German trio of which he was a founding member. In the ensuing 15 years he released music from **Aube**, **Francisco López**, **Big City Orchestra**, **Noise-Maker's Fifes**, **Herbst9**, **Aidan Baker**, **Hélice Pied**, and many others. Long before these artists would become the darlings of Alien8, Mego, Die Stadt, and other labels, Knappe recognized their ability and released their music on a format not often associated with experimental music. Thanks to the restrictions of the 7" records, artists on Drone have been forced to distill their music into its most important elements. As a result many artists release some of their best and most concise work on Drone Records.

The respect Drone has garnered over the years is not simply a matter of Knappe's taste and ability to find, attract, and expose previously obscure bands. Knappe's attention to detail and quality control play a large role in Drone's success as well. Nearly every record comes housed in a hand-painted or hand-crafted sleeve and is decorated with elaborate labels. The records themselves can also be quite ornate and are treated as works of art. Everything Drone releases stands out against the slew of cheaply produced and often ignored 7" releases that find their way to record stores year in and year out. Where some labels and artists will abuse the format and employ it to release music cheaply and quickly, Knappe approaches the production of these mini-gems with an unmatched air of seriousness. These records are neither promotional items nor mere singles, but complete and potent statements from the artists. They have a weighty substance about them and command attention thanks to all the work that goes into them.

Drone Records (along with Die Stadt and Touch Records) has both made the 7" a viable format for experimental musicians and given it new life. Knappe brings a personal philosophy to his work, which unifies and grounds everything he releases. He states,

"Drone Records distributes music that encourages and requires sensitivity, calls for a critical awareness, has neither any commercial orientation nor does it follow any common marketing trends (hence staying away from an entertainment industry that is focused on profit maximization). Our declared objective is the support and distribution of an intelligent musical culture that foregrounds personal communication and exchange as well as an utmost variety of alternative, experimental and critical contents."

The experimental and critical content of which Knappe speaks often follows a strange kind of "internal" or "spiritual" logic that magnifies the place of the paranormal, the religious, and the unknown in the world. The website claims that the music released on the label is "for the unconscious, for the irrational mind, for non-linear perception" and dedicated to an unrealized reality. Knappe's pseudo-philosophy activates the imagination and contextualizes the music, but also describes the content of many of the records on the label. In general, drone music wields an abstract power begging for interpretation; the emotional and intellectual content of the music is typically formed by the listener as much as it is by the artist. Yet, when listening to Soleilkraast or Lunar Abyss Deus Organum, there can be little doubt that the music is a map inner space and a means for the telling of a particular story. Drone Records releases abstract music, but the label's ethos renders the abstract in it and anchors it to something solid and identifiable. In the end that makes the music more approachable and somehow more personal. At the very least it situates the music in this world, the one that I occupy.

Knappe has even written a thesis on the connection between music and the unconscious mind. Titled "Das Unbewusste Und Der Klang: Psychoanalyse und experimentelle Geräuschkunst," the paper ostensibly explores the nature of "noise music" and its effect on the human individual beyond immediate and physical sensations. You can download it from the label's website, but you'll need to learn to read German, first.

By actively thinking about what he writes and releases Knappe has expanded abstract music's reach and deepened its vocabulary. Though the 7" remains Knappe's preferred format, he has ventured into the digital world in an effort to make some of his back catalog more widely available. In 2006, Tumult Records released a double CD compilation of records released on Drone. Picked by Tumult's curator, the compilation included music from Maeror Tri, Inade, Aube, Reynolds, Francisco López, and several others. This is the only non-7" release to come from Drone and in all likelihood it'll stay that way. Listeners looking to give Drone records a shot can start there. But, be warned, purchase of that compilation will likely precipitate a desire to purchase a turntable, too.

You can visit Drone's website for more information, including PDF files featuring press information for recent releases and interviews with Knappe, some of which are in English.

Originally published @ <http://laughtrack.wordpress.com>