

Pang

Somewhere off-mic: screams, hoots, distant sporadic clapping, a guitar twangs, someone coughs (a little nervously). And then a Rank-style gong echoes, announcing the compère, who steps forward to say: "Ladies and Gentlemen, live from the Peppermint Lounge... *The Cramps*."

The compère lisps; I hear him say *Crampths*. It's unexpected, endearing, and it makes me smile. When a fuzzing, sudden, shimmering, metallic, buzz-sawing NOISE opens this live version of 'Thee Most Exalted Potentate of Love' my smile splits to a grin. I catch my breath. My chest constricts: there's a sort of squeeze in my heart. It's abrupt, intense; a momentary nausea, not unlike the vertigo upon encountering a sudden drop.

I've come to think of this feeling as my 'twinge' or 'pang'. It's a fleeting feeling and is not (cannot be) sustained beyond a few seconds: once the Cramps get going into the song proper, it dissipates. Even though I love the rest of the track, even though this remaining listening gives me *pleasure* – it doesn't give me a *pang*. If I want to have it again, (and frequently I do, for it's very addictive) then I have to rewind, take things right back to that introduction and listen – and *wait* – for those first few moments of wonderful noise to get to me all over again.

I became aware that I was accumulating such moments, finding them in diverse species of music. It began to worry me a little. I wondered what was going on, if I were perhaps going a bit crazy. I've come to realise that my response is caused by very particular sorts of sounds. It punctuates my musical listening, occurring unexpectedly, irrationally even. It embarrasses me a little, especially when it happens as I listen to very bad music: one of the first times I experienced it was as a young kid listening to Rainbow's 'Since You've Been Gone'. There's a certain vocal 'huh' I upon which I fixated, an odd moment that seems almost as if Graham Bonnet had been punched in the stomach in order to make it. I'd play the track again and again, waiting to hear that momentary exclamation: I like to think it was a funny kind of sympathetic magic that caused me a similar clout to my guts.

Since then, vocals have often caused a pang: I react especially to fragments when a voice creaks and cracks, when it is oddly high or low, when straining and yearning so that it's on the edge of breaking up. So it's no surprise that I find countless triggers in music by The Fall, where Mark E. Smith's voice screeches and bays, unexpectedly growls and yelps, or garbles phlegmy coughs. It's there in tracks as diverse as the Homosexuals 'My Night Out', which lets rip an exhilarating scream, or LCD Soundsystem's 'Thrills' when something nasal, not to say *adenoidal*, about the voice really gets to me. It's prompted by some vocalisations of Jarvis Cocker, too: those noises where he gasps or cries, or squeaks like a wounded creature... I suspect that my reaction recognises something primal about these sounds; perhaps these not wholly controlled eruptions suggest something of our animal underbelly?

I get it too thanks to the particular sounds of 'odd' instruments, or else when something familiar suddenly makes an unexpected sound. I remember owning a particular recording of violinist Itzhak Perlman playing Vivaldi's 'Le quattro stagioni'. There's a short passage where, amidst the virtuoso playing, he deliberately scrapes his bows across the strings, and I played the movement over and over in order to experience again the feeling caused by this grinding sound. I listen keenly for the eruption of strange twangs and hums, often coming from instruments I don't know. I'm most especially sensitive to those whose sound evokes egg-slicers or the plucking of stretched elastic bands! I suspect this is why

I get such pleasures from the likes of Hala Strana, where Stephen R. Smith uses all manner of uncommon instruments: the sleeve notes list thumb piano, hurdy-gurdy, spike fiddles, xaphoon and optigan organ – few of which I can picture with any certainty, but whose sounds guarantee repeated pangs. The sudden collision or isolation of particular drones, or the brief emergence of strange harmonics is another likely source, as are the wails and hoots of off-kilter Balkan brass.

My pang can be provoked by squalls of guitar feedback, by filthy bass noise. It arrives with sounds made by fx pedals or scratched vinyl, with the simplest field recordings or with skittering electronic squeaks and glitches made through laptop processes that remain unfathomable to me. I'm not fetishistic about analogue or digital methods: both can cause my heart to tighten. Often, my attention is awoken by the ambiguity of what I'm listening to: was that a recorded or generated noise, the sound of a living thing, or merely some lively electricity?

I react to some percussion: specific and rarely repeated patterns of beats, or to the noise (the timbre even) of certain drums or cymbals. (Recently, I was amused to discover that there is such a thing as a 'pang cymbal'.) I recall the effects from Japanese percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani's live improvised performance, when he drew impossible noises from his instruments with ceramic bowls and stones and scraps of metal. Heads-down, drilled repetition certainly gives me pleasure, but it definitely can't cause a pang; however, when it is broken by sudden syncopations or stumbling rhythms, by interruptions and stalling, the pang is provoked in an instant.

But as soon as I have the intensity of my pang, it is over already. The sensation cannot be sustained for more than a few seconds. I find myself like a kid who, picked up and spun around by their parent, shouts 'again, again!' as soon as the spinning ends. I'm rather ashamed: it's a deeply childish sort of enjoyment. As a result of my desire to go 'again, again!' I have phases where the repeat play facility gets abused on my iPod or cd player, and where the needle is slipped again and again into that initial groove. This terrible compulsion to repeat the pang strikes me like a mania at times.

I once fantasised about making a tape of all those sounds I ached to hear, perhaps repeating each one several times, so I could enjoy the pang over and over, or else making a compilation of those special fragments I thrilled to in different tracks. But as I thought about it, I came to realise that their effective intensity would disappear at once because, of course, these particular moments have to be *anticipated*, and that means waiting through all the music that precedes them, that provides the context for their existence. Most of the things that generate my reaction occur quite far into a piece of music: part of the intensity is in listening and *waiting*, poised to register the precise section that acts as my trigger. The Cramps track with which I began this writing is rather atypical, as the sound that prompts my pang comes so early on in the piece, although the short delay of those initial noises-off, and the compère's introduction ensures a critical few seconds of deferral.

So my subsequent pangs are intensified by the pleasures of anticipation, delay and release. And in this I'm probably not that unusual. Some dance music very explicitly plays with these techniques, manipulating tracks that build to a climactic break via periods of extreme repetition: the track holds back longer than expected, making the club crowd wait for the moment of release, and thus making that release even more powerful. At this point they can be expected to go crazy for a short while, before the music subsides once more into the regular beats and dancers take it down a notch or three.

We know intuitively that intensity cannot be maintained for long: it requires a concomitant period of moderation, a backdrop from which it can periodically emerge. Were something permanently intense, we would eventually cease to feel it, numbly inured to its constant presence, or else we might succumb to what Georges Simmel once described as 'the blasé attitude', in which people develop a cool, distant, intellectualised way of dealing with the things around them in order to protect themselves from feeling overwhelmed by constant stimulation. In time, the blasé attitude reduces everything around to a state of indifferent equality. As a result of working in universities, where a distant, intellectualised attitude is *de rigueur* for many lecturers, I think I have acquired a persistent horror of becoming blasé and that my musical listening, punctuated by its pangs of intensity, is some part of a strategy to prevent it. In my physical and emotional excitement I'm attuned differently, vibrating, more alert to what's around me. Listening out for the moment that will bring my pleasurable pang, I attend more precisely to the music that precedes it, and which closes around it once more. Such moments are a shot in the arm; the physical response makes me eager, animated, reawakened to the world in which I find myself. It's no wonder I'm addicted to my musical fix.