Although the world “noise” signifies sound of any kind, and therefore embraces the more pleasing forms, such as music, we have almost limited its application to the objectionable. If we describe a composition or a performance as noisy, we imply either that a certain borderline between power and blatancy was passed, or that the force employed was not balanced by thematic or other interest. In choosing a house, one of the first things we enquire about is the quietude of the neighbourhood. We even, as often as possible, prohibit street cries and wandering minstrels. “Hold your nige, I beg of you,” said Mrs. Gamp {Martin Chuzzlewit}, on a memorable occasion, and her words just about represent our attitude on the subject. Appropriately enough, my trembling finger had scarce scrawled the words, when a tremendous and quite unnecessary banging of two doors in the lower part of the house startled me. I am a man of few words, as you know, but I fear that one of the least reputable of these few had left my lips before the echoes had died away. I did not set out to write of doors, but cannot but pause here and ask you to consider, as bearing on the subject with which I shall concern myself as soon as I can get under way, that while the knocking at a door may be impressive and dramatic, the banging of one is never more than mere futile and irritating noise. Those of you who have been present at a performance of “Macbeth” will remember the thrill you felt when after the murder of Duncan the knocking at the gate is heard. (An acute enquiry into the reason of this thrill occurs in De Quincey, in the essay “On the Knocking Gate in
‘Macbeth.’” You might do worse than read it to-morrow, instead of *Home Chat*, as it has its application to certain matters in our own art.) How much the well known figure in the first movement of Beethoven’s C minor Symphony gains from being associated in the minds of hearers with “Fate knocking at the door!” It is pretty certain that it was first suggested to the composer by the song of the yellow-hammer, but Beethoven himself said of it, “Such is the blow of Fate on the door.” Now while, as we see, such knocking may be symbolic, dramatic, and impressive, implying all kinds of possibilities - arrivals, tidings, disaster - the banging of a door, though giving a greater shock to the ear, is less impressive because it signifies so much less. It is either a sign of a regrettable want of self-control on the part of the person who is coming in or going out; or, as in the case which led to this digression, it points to a lack of care on the part of the domestic staff; - asking your pardon for dragging such a detail from its decent homely shade into the fierce light that beats upon the printed page.

Seeing then that we all hate noise, and roundly abuse those who inflict it on us unnecessarily (the matter of doors, for instance, has goaded even me, a mild man, into the nearest approach I can make to remonstrance with Autolyca), it is only to be expected of the Futurists that they should undertake to prove to us that noise is a thing to be loved and sought after, even as they would have us believe that crude daubs are to be preferred to beautiful pictures. Although long past the heady days of youth, I still
have some sneaking regard for people who are up against convention, and I would condemn none of these strange folk unheard. So when I saw that Signor Marinetti was to discourse on “The Art of Noises” and that his hortation was to be followed by the performance of “Two Noise Spirals” at the London Coliseum on June 15th, I felt that I must be there. But in the first place, even as Aunt Betsy Trotwood was wont to ask impatiently “In heaven’s name, why ‘Rookery?’” so do I enquire “why Spiral?” My Nuttall gives me no clue:

“Spiral [says that useful and incoherent volume], spi’ral, a., winding like a screw; pointed like a spire; n., a curve which continuously recedes from the centre, - round which it revolves (Geom.) SPIRALLY, spi’ral-ly, ad., in a spiral manner; in the manner of a screw. SPIRALITY, spi’ral/-e-te, s. the quality of being a spiral.”

None of these things have any bearing on sound: hence the term “noise spirals.” But let that pass. Here I am at the Coliseum, whiling away the time of waiting by reading the booklet on sale called “Futurism and the Art of Noises.” On the front cover is a portrait of Marinetti himself, hopelessly out of date in that it is a real likeness, showing him a seemly man to look on, clad even as you and I, and not wearing the garment that he recently invented,- a shapeless robe into which you crept on rising, making all fast with the solitary button allowed you. One naturally wonders,- but I resist the temptation to consider the responsibilities of that one button, attractive through the theme may be.

Here is Marinetti plainly shown forth on the front cover. This we may call a portrait in the old style. The new we find on the back. Here by the simple process of printing various portraits irregularly over one another we get a confused mass of eyes, noses, chins and bowler hats. Below this nightmare is printed “F. T. Marinetti.” Opening the book and passing by a picture by Deverini {sic - Severini} entitled “The 14th July”- a collection of cubes, angles and other geometrical forms which would puzzle us if the artist had not thoughtfully put “Cafe 10” in one corner just to make things clear - we come to Luigi Russolo’s explanation of
“The Art of Noises and the Futurist Noise Tuners.” There is much in this on which I should like to comment. It must suffice to note that Mr. Russolo thinks that “Musical sounds are too restricted, both as regards variety and quality of colour. The most complex orchestra may be reduced to four or five different kinds of instruments as regards tone quality: viols, plectra, brasses, wood-winds and tympani. Music gropes in this little circle, vainly trying to create a new range of tone qualities.” But this classification takes no notice of such facts as the possibilities of variety in each instrument. It is all very well to say “viols,” and so dismiss all the strings as being one colour. But from the harmonics of the violin down to the rich notes of the double basses the colour possibilities of the string family, used singly and in combination, are almost inexhaustible. “Wood winds,” says Mr. Russolo, “pooh!” But what variety is implied in that one word! The piercing piccolo; the bright high register of the flute, the mellow middle notes and the melancholy low ones, sounding almost like a horn; the acid oboe; the clarinet with its distinct registers; the bassoon, clownish and expressive by turns; the desolate cornetto; the tearing double bassoon;—here be colours enow for such as can mix and use them with skill. So with the brass and percussion. But Mr. Russolo brushes the orchestra aside. “We,” he says, bursting into large type in his enthusiasm, “We break through this narrow circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise sounds.” He goes on to speak of the noises that salute our ears in a city:—

“The murmuring water, air, or gas in the metal pipes, the groaning and rattling of motors which undoubtedly breathe like animals, the palpitating of valves, the alternate motion of pistons, the sonorous jumps of tramcars on their rails, the cracking of whips, the flutter of flags…… the rolling shutters of shopfronts, the hubbub of the crowds, the different noises of the railway stations, forges, spinning wheels, printing works, electric factories, and underground railways. Nor should the absolutely new noises of modern warfare be forgotten. We modulate these very varied noises and reduce them to harmony and rhythm. My friend Piatti and I have so far invented and constructed the following noise-tuners:—Buzzers, Exploders, Whistlers, Thunderers, Murmurers, Gurglers, Rattlers, Cracklers and Roarers. My noise spirals are not mere impressionist reproductions of the surrounding life, but synthetically treated noise emotions. In listening to the combined and harmonized notes of the Exploders, the Whistlers, and the Gurglers, one scarcely thinks of motor cars, engines, or moving waters, but experiences a great Futurist absolutely unforeseen artistic emotion which resembles nothing but itself.”
While we are still waiting for this absolutely unforeseen artistic emotion - it is No. 12 on the programme, and passing by a painting by Russolo, entitled “One-three Heads,” in which two shadowy female faces merge into one another - there is probably a third somewhere to justify the title, but surveyals sideways and upside-down have not revealed it to me,- [and talking of odd titles of pictures, I would give much to see that by Boccioni mentioned on page 3, and called “Street entering a House.”]

Whatever the painting may be like, there is the genius of insanity in the title. Close your eyes and think of it for awhile - “Street entering a House”- the imagination boggles at it] we come to the “Initial Manifesto of Futurism,” from which I quote a few pearls:-

“Literature has hitherto glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy and sleep; we shall extol aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the double quick-step, the box on the ear, the fisticuff."
“We stand upon the extreme promontory of the centuries! Why should we look behind us, when we have to break in the mysterious portals of the impossible? Time and space died yesterday, already we live in the absolute, since we have already created speed, eternal and everpresent. “We wish to glorify War, the only health-giver of the world.. the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful Ideas that kill.. “We wish to destroy the museums, the libraries. 
“Museums, cemeteries! .. For men on their death-beds, for invalids, and for prisoners, very well! .. But we will have none of it, we, the young, the strong, and the living FUTURISTS!
“Come, then, the good incendiaries with their charred fingers! .. Here they come! Here they come! Set fire to the shelves! Deviate the course of canals to flood the cellars of the museums! Oh! May the glorious canvasses drift helplessly! Seize pickaxes and hammers! Sap the foundations of venerable cities! .. When we are old, let others throw us into the basket like useless manuscripts. They will come bounding upon the lightsome measure of their first poems, scratching the air with their hooked fingers, and scenting at the academy doors the pleasant odour of our rotting minds, marked out already for the catacombs of the libraries. “But we shall not be there. They will find us right out in the country beneath a dreary shed, the monotonous rain-drops strumming on the roof, cowering by our trepidating aeroplanes, warming our hands at the miserable fire which our books of to-day will make, blazing gaily beneath the dazzling flight of their images. They will surge around us, breathless with anxiety and disappointment, and all exasperated by our dauntless courage, will throw themselves upon us to slay us, with all the more hatred because their hearts will be filled with love and admiration for us. And Injustice, strong and healthy, will burst forth radiantly in their eyes. For art can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice.”

There are a few discrepancies here which need more reconciling than we have time for. Let us leave them by that fire, miserable it may be, but at the same time blazing gaily, and pass on to the final stretto:-

“Look at us! We are not breathless .. Our heart does not feel the slightest weariness! For it is fed with fire, hatred and speed! That surprises you? It is because you do not remember even having lived!
“Your objections? Enough! enough! I know them! It is agreed! We know well what our fine and false intelligence tells us. We are, it says, only the summary and extension of our ancestors. Perhaps! Very well! What matters? But we do not wish to hear! Beware of repeating those infamous words! Better lift your head!
“We stand upon the summit of the world, and once more we cast our
Perhaps only some doubt as to the supply of notes of exclamation made F.T.M. hold his hand here, instead of summing up the matter calmly and judicially in some such peroration as this:-

“What ho? She bumps! All tickets, please! Keep to the left! Not this train! Hurry on, Miss! All change! If you don’t see what you want in the window, heave a brick through and try further up the street! Your objections? Enough! Enough! We are insured! You fear the hounds of the law? Perhaps! Very well! What matter! Pooh! Tish! Also bah! We stand upon the summit of the world and once more spit our contempt at the empyrean. Wow! Wow!”

The booklet also contains the more recent manifesto to the English public, which probably most of you have read. The gentlemen whose names Marinetti appended in addition to his own at once disclaimed connection with it, but I note that in this reprint they are retained, which is hardly cricket. But here is No. 12 signalled, and amid a spatter of hand-claps Signor Marinetti appears and begins to read his speech. Unfortunately, his English is so very much broken that he is understood with difficulty, and soon at a convenient pause the gallery breaks into a storm of ironic applause, which never entirely stops until the oration is ended. For the Signor, having put his hand to the speech, is not to be turned back. He abates us not a word, but goes valiantly on, doing more and more violence to our tongue as his anger and excitement increase. When he goes off, he receives some real applause, partly for having finished and partly for his plucky stand. Then the curtain opens and we see the noise-tuners, each with its attendant mechanic, with music desk, and the conductor with baton and full score. The first spiral is called “The Awakening of a Great City.” The noise-tuners are big boxes with funnels facing the audience. The men in charge turn handles and the machines emit groans and similar noises more like muffled fog-horns than anything else. There is in addition what sounds like an ordinary drum and a xylophone. The sounds have definite notes and their force is varied by the speed with which the handles are turned. Of recognisable themes, there were but two,—a little figure repeated monotonously by the xylophone and another consisting of the first four notes of the descending major scale played by a higher instrument in a very wavering manner, like a thing in pain. The great city was a long time awakening and even when fully roused was no great shakes for noise. The “spiral” might as well have been described as “Sleepy Hollow trying to Wake Up and
abandoning the Attempt.” For the oddest thing about the whole show was that these “noise-tuners” with their fearsome names were the very smallest of small beer after all. Thunderer? It could have been drowned easily by a good tympanist. Roarer? It could never have held up its head against a tuba. Whistler? A boy scout of my acquaintance could do - and does - far more execution with his piccolo. Exploder? It was a mere tap, a fair imitation of a violent woodpecker compared with a door of this house when the neat-handed Phyllis forgets that her master has nerves. As for the buzzers, &c., you can imagine that they cracked no plaster.

Indeed, none of the noise-tuners could compare with some bipedal rivals in the gallery. These roared and whistled in no half-hearted manner, while fusillades of rhythmical hand clapping and chaste imitations of howling dogs made up a *tutti* beside which the stage performance, regarded as a fresco of noises, was dull. Like Marinetti, Russolo was not to be stopped by sounds of dissent. He held on his course, and after fifteen minutes the first spiral ended. No one thought he would have the temerity to proceed with the second item, called “A Meeting of Motor Cars and Aero-planes.” But after walking off the stage and on again, he raised his baton and once more conjured up noises on both sides of the footlights. The second piece was like the first, mainly a chorus of muted foghorns, and lasted twelve minutes. The weakness of the performance was its deadly monotony. Music, “groping in its little circle,” gives us a thousandfold more variety than these instruments. Add to their monotony their surprising feebleness - I for one would have hailed a good stirring climax of noises - and you see that the new science of “noise-tuning,” after mountainous labour, has produced the veriest mouse. The performance came just before the interval; and when our old friend the safety curtain slowly descended (according to the statute in that case made and provided) a roar of laughter went up at its timely arrival. Significant, too, was the burst of applause with which the audience hailed the opening bars of German’s two jolly dances from “Much Ado About Nothing.” Both in power and variety, real music left the noise-tuners hopelessly beaten.

Let us see how much there is in this idea of organising and performing noises; and first let it be counted to these Italians for righteousness that they do not call the result music. I have lately been to more than one concert whereat the promoters had contracted to supply music and instead gave us noise - and noise, too, beside which these “spirals” were innocuous. Russolo, Piatti & Co. are right in the first of their premises,- namely, that there are innumerable sounds in nature and in the busy haunts of men that have a significance and at times a charm of their own. But we needed not these fervid Tuscans to tell us that. The feeblest
poetaster, as well as the Wordsworths and Tennysons have had their melodious say as to the murmuring breeze, the rolling thunder, the babbling brook and the other constituents in nature’s orchestra; nor have less idyllic sounds lacked singers in prose and verse. Overhaul your Walt Whitman and your Kipling, among others, for the chanting of the material side of things. So far the Futurists are right, though the elaborate setting forth of their discovery savours somewhat of the operation vulgarly known as teaching your grandmother to suck eggs. They are hopelessly wrong, I think, in two things. First, in claiming that these sounds can be made the basis of a concert performance; and, secondly, in supposing that their “noise-tuners” can ever supersede or even supplement the existing orchestra.

As to the first point, they seem to overlook the fact that the sounds lose most, sometimes all, of their effect when removed from their surroundings and attendant circumstances. [I am writing this in the scoring box of a famous county cricket ground, a sacred eyrie to which I have access on occasions by virtue of acquaintance with the presiding genius, a hard-bitten veteran as full of the lore of the game as an egg is of meat, and with two willing ears by his side to-day in which to pour it. My position accounts for the following illustration.] Supposing I hired half-a-dozen lusty fellows to stand on the Coliseum stage and say “How’s that?” in unison, with a crowd behind to follow with a shout. It does not promise to be an exciting entertainment, does it? But see how a thing small in itself becomes big on occasion. A few moments agone the deep hush that accompanies the delivery of the ball was broken by a shout of “’sthat” from wicketkeeper and eager-bending slips, with a roar from the many-headed as the white sleeve of the umpire was raised in assent. The thing is over in a second or two, but where is the man knowing aught of the game of games who can hear it without a stirring of the blood? Here is another instance of a commonplace sound becoming charged with meaning. I take it from the De Quincey essay referred to above,-

“If the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near to the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man,- if all at once he should hear the deathlike stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment
when the suspension ceases and the goings-on of life are suddenly resumed.”

If you will cast your mind back to the last funeral you attended and will recall the crunching sound of the wheels breaking the silence, you will agree with me that the illustration shows a keen observation on the part of the little opium eater. But when Russolo produces from one of his sausage machines a noise resembling vehicular traffic, I am unmoved; and when he keeps it up for ten minutes at a time and would have me believe that he is enlarging the bounds of art and giving me sounds of greater significance than I can get from an orchestra, I become bored and disrespectful. Berlioz hit on the Futurist idea when he remarked in his “Orchestration” on the thrilling effect of a regiment of soldiers grounding their arms. (I quote from memory, my copy of the work having been weakly lent to a pupil and so gone the way of borrowed books.) But Berlioz gets at only a small part of the reason of the effect when he ascribes it to the unanimity with which the men perform the action. How much of the thrill should we feel if we had a crowd of men in mufti grounding billets of wood instead of rifles? We should hear unmoved the prosaic thud, though the actual sound may be exactly the same as that produced by the weapons. So we see that the material side of the thing counts for little. What stirs us when real soldiers and real guns are used is the subconscious recognition of the fact that these are not mere men banging pieces of wood and metal on the ground but part of the monstrous fist with which nations, words having failed, smite one another till their differences are settled. We see behind the neat ranks providing us with a spectacle, a shadowy crowd of widows, orphans, and broken men, and (noted by the sordid among us) the tax-gatherer hitting us roundly. “My noise spirals,” says Russolo, “are not mere impressionist reproductions of the surrounding life, but synthetically-treated noise emotions.” Brave words, but as very few noises of those chosen for treatment - pistons, tramcars, steam pipes, rolling shutters of shop fronts, railway stations, and the like - have any emotional significance in themselves, they are hardly likely to acquire it by synthesis. The things that matter are not the things that can be seen, handled or reproduced. Marinetti and his like profess to rejoice in machinery, crowds, skyscrapers and the like. Mr. Wyndham Lewis, another Futurist, asked recently where he likes spending a holiday, recommended the Black Country. He says proudly that from the house he has chosen for this summer holiday, he can see “five hundred smoke stacks, a thousand cranes and buildings like a multitude of penitentiaries,” while Signor Marinetti says “I enjoy a lot more to cross the Strand between the motor-buses, the motor cars and the restless traffic, than a lonely walk in a
country lane. Only sick people need holidays. The healthy ones should always enjoy life in town and work. Rest means a stop to progress.” Of course much depends on your definition of progress. If you mean hustle, then rest is a hindrance. But this idea of progress is as gross and material as the estimation of a man’s success by his balance in the bank. Not thus is the best work to be judged.

The weakest point about this new school of art is its glorification of the tangible rather than of the skill and enterprise that brings it forth. Judged by this standard, the greatest cities are those that contain most bricks and mortar. Fortunately, there are other standards. Thus Walt Whitman, himself a Futurist in many ways, but a poet at the same time:-

What do you think endures?  
Do you think a great city endures?  
Or a teeming manufacturing state? Or a prepared constitution? Or the best-built steamships?  
Or hotels of granite and iron? Or any chef-d’œuvres of engineering, forts, armaments?  
Away! These things are not to be cherished for themselves;  
They fill the hour, the dancers dance, the musicians play for them.  
The show passes. All does well, of course.  
All does very well till one flash of defiance.  
A great city is that which has the greatest men and women.  
If it be a few ragged huts, it is still the greatest city in the whole world.

To revellers in pace and admirers of the town I would commend also these other lines of Whitman:-

As I walk these broad majestic days of peace,..  
Around me I hear that éclat of the world, politics, produce,  
The announcements of recognised things, science,  
The approved growth of cities and the spread of inventions.  
I see the ships (they will last a few years),  
The vast factories with their foremen and workmen,  
And I hear the indorsement of all, and do not object to it.  
But I too announce solid things.  
Science, ships, politics, cities, factories, are not nothing,  
Like a grand procession to music of distant bugles pouring, triumphantly moving, and grander heaving in sight  
They stand for realities,- all is as it should be,  
Then my realities;  
What else is so real as mine?
Libertad and the divine average, freedom to every slave on the face of the
earth,
The rapt promises and luminé of seers, the spiritual world, these
centuries-lasting songs,
And our visions, the visions of poets, the most solid announcement of any.

All these things of which Whitman sings as being the most real of all are
things that are not seen, but which will outlast all the bricks and mortar so
doted on by our matter-of-fact eccentrics.

Music and noise,- perfume and stench: the analogy is obvious. Who
knows? Perhaps there may be to-day some infant Russolo, a wailing
putty-faced baby, destined in a score of years to do for our nose what to-
day’s Russolo is doing for our ears. I may yet find myself at the Coliseum,
waiting for No. 12 again, not a “Grand Concert of Noise-Spirals,” long
since passé, but announced as a “Riot of Stench-Blenders.” Haply I may
again while away the time of waiting by reading the explanations of this
Russolo of the future in such terms as follow:-

“The art of the perfumer is too restricted, both as regards variety and
quality of odour. The most complex perfumery may be reduced to four
or five different kinds,—such as attar of roses, Parma violet, patchouli,
musk and lavender. Perfumery gropes in this little circle, vainly trying to
create a new range of olfactory sensations. We break through this narrow
round of pure odours and conquer the infinite variety of stenches. When
we walk through a great city our noses are saluted by defective drains,
drippings of petrol, pickle factories, mews and bone yards. From shops
come the reek of onions, burning fat, fried fish, putrid meat and venerable
cheese. My friend Piatti and I so far have invented the following stench-
blenders:—

Limbergers, Sewers, Chinese stink pots, Burning rubber, Shop eggs
(scrambled), Attar of polecat, Eau d’assafoetida, Friedfishers, Whiffers.
We blend these varied stenches and reduce them to subtle shades and
cross-breeds. Our stench-blenders are not mere slavish reproductions of
the surrounding life, but synthetically-treated smell-emotions. Inhaling
the combined and harmonised smells of the Limbergers, Polecats, Sewers,
and Friedfishers one scarcely thinks of cheese, the Zoo, drains, or plaice,
but experiences a great Futurist absolutely unforeseen artistic olfactory
emotion which resembles nothing but itself.”

Thus may history repeat itself. The other afternoon, when the noise-
spirals were let loose, the stern critics of the gallery retorted in kind and
beat the instruments at their own game. Between two fires, I laughed
until I ached. But if when the odours are unchained the gallery again go one better, the Coliseum will be no place for me. Two minutes after the first sniff you shall find me browsing among the second-hand bookshops of Charing Cross Road, thinking, not without ruth, of some heroic hapless Christabel, who knowing nothing of what is toward, has chosen on that very afternoon to chain and padlock herself to a seat and has thrown away the key.