Analysing the Transforming Finnish Soundscapes
Heikki Uimonen, Meri Kytö

To cite this version:

HAL Id: hal-01396316
https://hal.science/hal-01396316
Submitted on 12 Dec 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Analysing the Transforming Finnish Soundscapes project

Heikki UIMONEN¹, Meri KYTÖ²

1. Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland heikki.uimonen@uniarts.fi
2. University of Tampere, School of Communication, Media and Theatre, Finland, meri.kyto@uta.fi

Abstract. Transforming Finnish Soundscapes (2014–2016) is a project continuing but not restricted to themes introduced in the research project One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes (2004–2006). Both projects collect, document, archive and analyse the qualitative aspects of sonic environments within the Finnish geographical borders. Of particular interest are the ways recordings are socially used, exchanged, listened to and made in participatory fashion. Terrestrial radio and digital media, such as web mapping tools and portable recording devices, were utilised in collecting, preserving and presenting the materials. The analysis of data collected ten years apart enables a unique diachronic comparison of soundscapes.

Keywords: soundscape, acoustic community, sound memories, radio

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Finnish Society for Acoustic Ecology has organised projects to document and research changing sonic environments. Transforming Finnish Soundscapes (TFS, 2014–2016) is a project which continues the themes introduced in the project One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes (2004–2006). Both projects collect, document, archive and analyse the qualitative aspects of sonic environments within the Finnish geographical borders. These include the experiences and memories of people living within their sonic environments, pedagogical actions on listening and the provision of access to the documented soundscapes to researchers and broader audiences¹.

The analysis of the materials from these two projects conducted ten years apart enables a unique diachronic comparison of the changes and non-changes in the experiences, reality and shifting meanings in the soundscapes documented. Inspired by earlier large-scale research projects, such as Acoustic Environments in Change (Järviäinen et al 2009), the qualitative focus on the theoretical concerns of acoustemology and the social ecology of sound adds to the projects’ view of the

1. The project was organised and executed by the Finnish Society for Acoustic Ecology in collaboration with the Sibelius Academy University of the Arts Helsinki, University of Tampere, University of Eastern Finland, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Åbo Akademi, Finnish Literature Society and Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE.
dimensions of practical knowledge that come from the practice of listening as a way of knowing place.

Due to the great variety of the backgrounds of the scholars involved in the project, multidisciplinary approaches were taken to the research projects. A forthcoming anthology includes research articles on soundscape-recording perspectives; media research on the journalistic use of the term ‘soundscape’ in Finnish media; the folkloristic and poetic roots of sonic descriptions of thunder, cows and swallows; archaeological research on acoustic measurements at prehistoric rock painting areas in Lapland; public library soundscapes in change; generational changes in listening to water and lakes; shifting concepts of nature and the evolution of silent tourism; and the formation of an electro-acoustic community via a call-in radio programme (Uimonen, Kytö & Ruohonen 2017).

Of particular interest for TFS are the ways changing soundscapes are represented in speech and written text as descriptions. This research material was gathered through a nationwide writing competition collecting stories about environmental sounds. The project was specifically aimed at gathering individual and collective knowledge related to the sounds of given places and variable situations in nature, rural areas and cities during everyday life and festive occasions. This paper presents views on the fieldwork methods used and disseminates preliminary results from a nationwide radio programme concentrating on environmental sounds.

**Methods for Gathering Materials**

One motivation for collecting soundscapes (i.e. recorded environmental sounds and related texts) is to preserve cultural heritage. In this context, two perspectives should be noted: 1) recording and archiving soundscapes as cultural heritage; and 2) supporting cultural knowledge of the sonic environment to enhance intangible cultural heritage and cultural sustainability (Kytö, Remy & Uimonen 2012). TFS not only undertook archiving for the preservation of cultural heritage but also actively encouraged citizens to pay attention to their everyday soundscapes as meaningful contemporary culture.

Since the project ten years earlier, the applications offered by digital media, such as web mapping tools and portable recording devices, have immensely broadened the possibilities for gathering and accessing participatory materials. A selection of recordings made professionally by project members and with lighter recording equipment, such as smart phones, by the public is available online at the listening map, which contains nearly 300 recordings from 2004 onwards. The participatory recording methods (see Uimonen 2011) included recording theme days, such as encouraging the public to participate in World Listening Day and then upload sounds to the project map database. Methods which emphasised the listening point of the actor in the soundscape were used frequently. These included guiding members of the public to record and monitor themselves (see Figure 1).

2. http://socsproject.blogspot.fi/p/about.html
Following the contemporary habits of social media use, some recordings were also considered and used as gifts between friends. The recordings were seen as more than objects to be ‘put away and archived’ but also as mediators of social relationships. For example, when we informed an elderly lady in Northern Ostrobothnia that we would also be interviewing her friend in another town the same day, she asked us to record the sound of breaking icicles in her yard for her friend to listen to (see figure 2). These sounds were not part of her written description or her interview but for her friends who had also submitted an entry to the writing competition.

**Figure 1. Advising an informant how to hold a digital recorder while skateboarding downhill. Picture: Kaisa Ruohonen**

**Figure 2. Recording of breaking icicles, a sonic gift between friends living in different towns. Picture: Tatu Naukkarinen**

**Sound Cultures in a Radio Programme**

A nationwide radio programme was used to disseminate environmental recordings and preliminary research results to support the project’s pedagogical goals. This was
done through the Finnish Broadcasting Company’s special call-in programme, which has broadcasted environmental sound contents and individual sounds since 2012.

A three-hour, live programme called Äänien ilta (Evening with Sounds) with approximately 200 000 listeners per broadcast features callers’ narratives of their personal experiences and memories of contemporary and historical sonic phenomena from urban, agricultural and natural settings. Sound requests are fulfilled with the help of sound archives and present-day soundscape recordings. Radiogenic programme content refers to experiments and contents made specifically for the medium of radio. Producing this content is a goal of the studio hosts in planning the programme. The broadcast also enables the study of the cultural, social and aesthetic nature of the requested sounds, similarly to music call-in shows which share music and related experiences. This content can be approached theoretically from the perspective of listeners’ soundscape competence, or the ability to interpret sounds in a given cultural background (Truax 2001).

The programme also elicits sound memories and brings forth personally and culturally meaningful sonic phenomena. The most frequently requested sounds include those of threshing and reaping machines, milking by hand and various tractor engines. Requests for these agricultural and, in some cases, disappeared sounds are accompanied by requests for more contemporary and urban sonic phenomena and sounds familiar from media use, such as historical audio signals and jingles and the voices of popular radio play characters.

**Conclusion**

In executing different pedagogical, participatory and communal actions, TFS has increased awareness of the soundscape and underlined its importance for individuals and communities. The transformation of various acoustic spaces can be partly explained by changes in the technological and material environment, including digitalisation. Social and cultural changes are driven by urbanisation (the move from the countryside to cities) and the emergence of the service society, starting in the 1930s and accelerating in 1960s to ultimately produce what is commonly called the self-service society.

Changes in the material environment can be detected in the most mundane situations: for example, simply replacing dozens of eaves troughs in one narrow street changed the sound of rain for one informant couple (see Figure 3). Similarly, advances in the technological environment and digitalisation have changed the ambiance of university exams, which have moved from large auditoriums to solitary computer rooms and were previously written in hand on paper but now on the screen with a keyboard. These examples clearly demonstrate the subtle but effective influences on the everyday lived environment. It is also noted that political and economic structures affect, limit and thus shape how people and communities use sound and form in their everyday lived space.
Furthermore, the nature of making environmental recordings and the use of recording devices have been transformed. Recording soundscapes as a research tool and a means of collecting data has been proven to be successful in soundscape research. Also, the importance of archiving recordings with accompanying contextual information has been made clear. However, it should be noted that, while carrying out participatory research, the role of technology is somewhat different due to the increased accessibility and usability of digital recorders. Consequently, the ways the public uses and shares recording media are somewhat different compared to twenty or thirty years ago. Documenting environmental sounds can be considered equal to photographing in social interactions and thus be used in everyday interactions. Recordings should not only be archived or even fetishised but should be considered both documentation and tools of communication and entertainment, equally usable for both scholars and the greater public.

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the Finnish Cultural Foundation for its financial support of the project.
References


Truax, B. (2001), Acoustic communication, second edition, Westport, Ablex

Authors

Dr Heikki Uimonen is a professor of popular music research at Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland. He is an ethnomusicologist and a docent in acoustic communication and soundscape studies at the universities of Tampere and Eastern Finland (heikki.uimonen@uniarts.fi).

Dr Meri Kytö is a postdoctoral researcher in music studies at the University of Tampere, Finland. She studies articulations of privacy and domestication in urban acoustic spaces and is interested in methods involving sensory ethnography.