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► **To cite this version:**

Simon Fargeot, Olivier Derrien, Gaetan Parseihian, Mitsuko Aramaki, Richard Kronland-Martinet. Subjective evaluation of spatial distortions induced by a sound source separation process. EAA Spatial Audio Signal Processing Symposium, Sep 2019, Paris, France. pp.67-72, 10.25836/sasp.2019.15 . hal-02275177

**HAL Id: hal-02275177**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02275177>**

Submitted on 30 Aug 2019

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# SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF SPATIAL DISTORTIONS INDUCED BY A SOUND SOURCE SEPARATION PROCESS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new methodology to perceptually evaluate the spatial distortions that can occur in a spatial remix context, when using sound sources degraded by a source separation process. It consists in comparing localization performances on complex sound scenes composed of synthetic musical instruments in both clean and degraded cases. The localization task takes into account perceived position or positions of each instrument, as well as their perceived size and shape. In order to deal with this complex task, the test is performed through a virtual environment, using head-mounted gear. This methodology has been tested to evaluate spatial image distortions induced by an NMF source separation algorithm developed by Simon Leglaive [1]. The present study reveals that the source separation process leads to perceptible degradations of the spatial image. Three main kinds of spatial distortions have been characterized, including "phantom" sources emergence, source widening and increasing of the localization blur.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fields of video games, simulations and virtual reality are now tending to develop increasingly high-performance, realistic and immersive technologies. Efforts are made in terms of sound devices and sound processing to synthesize realistic sound scenes in a 3-D environment [2]. One challenge is the ability to analyze a 3-D audio stream corresponding to a complex sound scene in its basic components (i.e. individual sound sources), to modify the spatial scene (e.g. to change sound sources position) and to resynthesize a modified 3-D audio stream. This situation is referred to as spatial remix. Performing a spatial remix supposes reliable source separation algorithms. Such algorithms already exist but they are not perfect: recovered source signal suffer from several distortions. Objective and

subjective evaluation of separation artifacts have been conducted [3], [4] and according to Emiya [5], three types of separation artifacts have been characterized, including alteration of the target source and rejections of other sources into the target source. These criteria can be determined using two Matlab toolboxes: *Perceptual Evaluation methods for Audio Source Separation (PEASS)* [5] and *Blind Source Separation Evaluation (BSS-Eval)* toolbox [6]. However, these studies usually consider the separated source signals alone, i.e. when each source is listened to separately. This is different from the spatial remix problem, where all sources are rendered simultaneously. Liu et al. proposed a method for evaluating the quality of source separation in a spatial remix context using standard objective criterions only [7]. However as the finality of this work is intended to humans, it is important to subjectively evaluate spatial distortions induced by these separation artifacts. The main difficulty with subjective evaluations is the ability to objectivate the perception of auditors in terms of spatial soundscape, such that the results can be aggregated over a large number of subjects.

This paper aims to characterize and quantify perceptually these spatial distortions by conducting a localization test on both degraded and clean versions of the same polyphonic musical extract. Localization performances in both cases are then compared taking the clean sources case as a reference. The methodology is applied to assess the quality of Non-Negative Matrix Factorization source separation algorithm developed by Leglaive [1] which performs separation on convolutive mixtures. This algorithm is introduced in the first section. Then, the experimental design and results of this study are presented followed by a discussion.

## 2. AUDIO SOURCE SEPARATION

Source separation is a major research theme in signal processing. The basic principle is to estimate a number  $N$  components of a mixture from a number  $P$  of observations of this mixture. It is defined in the literature according to different criteria relating to the nature of the observed mixture: instantaneous (e.g. at the exit of a mixer) or convolutive (e.g. during a recording in a concert hall, with room effects), but also to the nature of the observations of this mixture: over-determined or under-determined as well



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as the nature of the observed sources: stationary or time varying sources. Depending on these criteria, several separation techniques can be applied [8].

## 2.1 Source separation using Non-negative Matrix Factorization

For under-determined convolutive recording of a musical piece, Non-negative Matrix Factorization methods seems to be a suitable choice [9]. It relies on the analysis of the energy of the mixture in the time-frequency domain, assuming that the phase of the signal is invariant over time. This involves approximating the time-frequency matrix  $S_{ij}$  of the energy sources  $j$  by the product of a spectral component matrix  $\Phi_{jk}(f)$  by a time activation matrix  $e_{jk}(n)$ , as follows:

$$|S_{ij}|^2 \simeq |\tilde{S}_{ij}|^2 = \sum_{k=1}^{K_j} e_{jk}(n)\Phi_{jk}(f) \quad (1)$$

where  $e_{jk}$  and  $\Phi_{jk}$  are non-negative. The  $k$  components of each source are estimated from the time-frequency representation (TFCT) of the mixture energy using its parsimonious and non-negative properties. In practice, NMF-based algorithms use an iterative process to best estimate the  $k$  components of the  $e$  and  $\Phi$  matrices of each source.

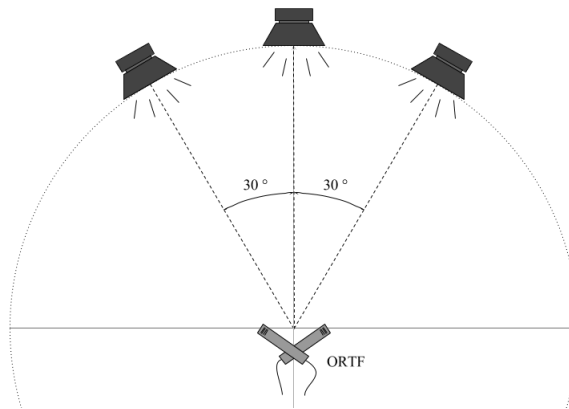
## 2.2 Leglaive's NMF algorithm

The separation toolbox used in this study is provided by S. Leglaive, R. Badeau and G. Richard in [1]. It is developed for Matlab and requires a couple of data regarding the mixture: audio file of the mixture, number of sources to be estimated, number of observations of the mixture. In addition, this algorithm does not perform a blind source separation since it requires strong prior knowledge of the nature of the mixture. Practically, source separation is performed in "oracle" mode. It requires to initialize the algorithm with a good approximation of the mixture filters impulse responses. They contain spatial cues of the sources in relation to the measurement device as well as information on the room in which the recording is performed. In this study, we wish to remain as close as possible to real use-cases. We consider the separation of acoustic mixes. Thus, the impulse responses must be estimated a priori before running the separation algorithm.

## 2.3 The acoustic mixes

The acoustic mixes are composed of three sound sources distributed in space and picked up by two cardioid microphones in ORTF configuration, as shown in Fig. 1.

Concerning mixture filters IR, these correspond to the transfer functions of the acoustic channel between the sources and the microphones. Under concert conditions, the number of sound sources on stage can be high and their position can vary over time. Measuring impulse responses at any point in the scene is tedious and unrealistic. However, a measurement of impulse responses at any location can already provide us with information on the late room



**Figure 1.** Apparatus for the production of real mixtures, composed by three sources and recorded by two cardioid microphones in ORTF configuration.

effect. If the positions of each source and microphones are known, it is possible with a single IR measurement to approximately build the corresponding impulse responses, by applying the right gain / delay matrix to the original IR. Assuming that they are correctly estimated, differences with the real case remain in the error of estimating the early room effects which actually depend on the position of the sources, especially at low frequencies. From the impulse responses of the central source (see Fig. 1) and by applying correct gain/delay pairs for the two peripheral sources, their impulse responses have been estimated. These fabricated responses were then used to initialize the algorithm and separation have been performed on four different musical extracts recorded in Fig. 1 conditions.

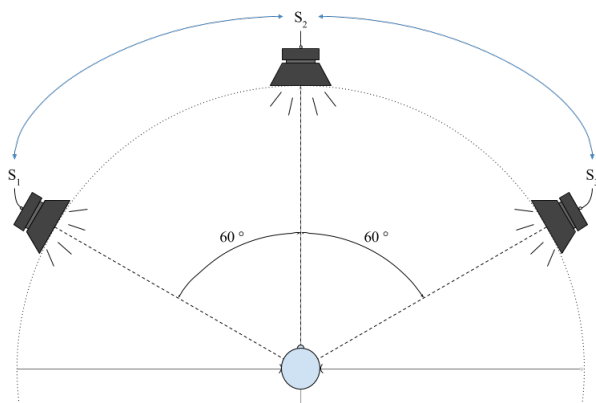
## 2.4 Spatial remix

In order to guide the implementation of the perceptual test, an informal listening session was conducted on the separate sources of the four mixes. The artifacts induced by the separation process are perceptible. The timbre and transients of the separate sources are slightly damaged and rejections are also present. Spatial remixes of the recovered source signals are then performed according to the spatial configuration presented in Fig. 2.

For each of the four mixes, the three recovered instruments are displayed in a "real source" format: one source per loudspeaker. This way, each mix can be rendered in three different spatial configurations obtained by changing the order of sources with respect to the loudspeaker setup. Thus, the subjective evaluation of spatial distortions induced by spatial remix of separated sources by Leglaive's NMF algorithm can be performed.

## 3. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The purpose of this perceptual experience is to verify if the spatial image of a spatial remix performed with separated sources is perceived as significantly degraded and to characterize these distortions. According to perceptual mechanisms involved in spatial hearing [10], one can assume



**Figure 2.** Spatial configuration of the sound scenes presented for the perceptual experience. The sources are placed on a circle with a radius  $R = 1.5\text{m}$ , on the azimuthal plane.  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  and  $S_3$ , are the three sources composing a sound scene. One source per speaker. The blue arrows represent the permutations of the sources corresponding to the different spatial configurations of an extract.

that distortions of the spatial image can be characterized in terms of :

- change in the perceived source position,
- change in the perceived source extent,
- unstable source position in time,
- virtual sound sources in false positions (phantom sources).

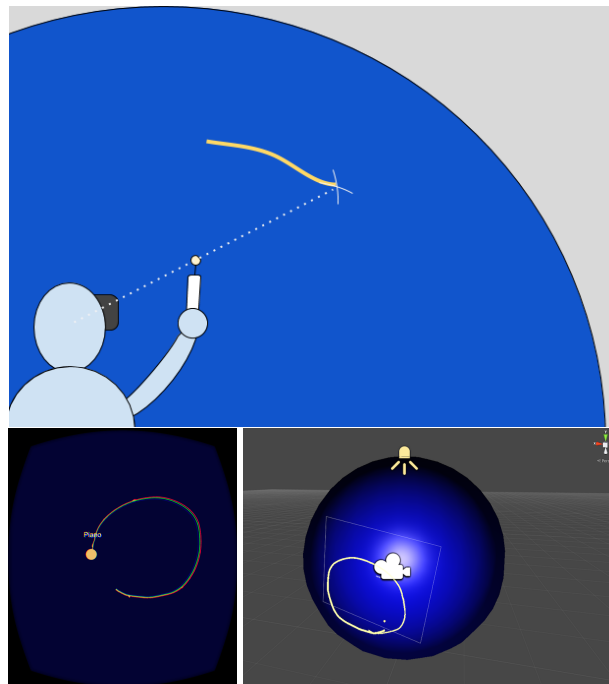
Therefore, the design of the experimental system has to allow people to report these phenomena, through a simple task.

### 3.1 Experimental set-up

The subject of the experiment is placed in the center of 3m diameter sphere equipped with 42 loudspeakers [11]. The spatial remix is carried out by 3 loudspeakers in the spatial configuration illustrated in Fig. 2. He or she is equipped with a virtual reality headset in which a virtual scene is projected. The visual environment was developed with Unity. It looks like a dark blue sphere with the same dimensions as the loudspeaker sphere. Using a Wiimote, the subject is able to draw in this virtual space, as shown in Fig. 3. Positions of the head of the subject and the Wiimote are tracked using the Optitrack motion capture system.

### 3.2 Subjects

The population sample selected for this study consists of 20 healthy subjects (15 male and 5 female), aged between 23 and 40 years. They do not have hearing problems. 50 % of them are used to listening to music on a stereophonic or binaural spatialization device.



**Figure 3.** Virtual environment and report method. Top image represents the report method. Bottom left image is a screen-shot of the subject's view. Bottom right image is a view of the virtual environment from the outside.

### 3.3 Stimuli

The study is conducted on 24 sound stimuli detailed as follows:

- 4 musical extracts composed of 3 instruments,
- for each extract:
  - 2 qualities: reference quality and quality degraded by the source separation process described in section 2.3),
  - 3 spatial configurations, corresponding to the three different permutations possible with one source per loudspeaker (see: figure 2).

The musical extracts are played in a loop, without interruption, until the subject has located their 3 instruments. In the end, 8 conditions are tested (4 extracts  $\times$  2 versions). The influence of spatial arrangement is not studied here, the 3 spatial configurations of each extract are considered as 3 repetitions of the same condition.

### 3.4 Procedure

This test is a sound source localization test where the subject is asked to surround in a virtual environment each instrument of musical mixes of 3 instruments. It is divided into three successive stages. The first step is a demonstration phase. Five drum extracts at different positions with different apparent widths are presented with their associated plot in the virtual environment. The purpose of this step is to give the subject an overview of the different scenarios that he may encounter during the test phase.

In the second step, which is a learning phase, the subject becomes familiar with the task he or she will have to perform during the test phase. The same five drum extracts are again presented and the subject is asked to spot the source position by surrounding as precisely as possible the area in which he perceives the sound.

The third and final step is the test phase. The 24 musical extracts composed of 3 instruments (*e.g.* drums, piano, bass) are presented randomly and the subjects are asked to focus successively on each element of the mix in order to locate them. Subjects must each time define the area in which they perceive the instrument they are being asked to locate. As in the learning phase, they must surround this area using a remote pointer. The average duration of the test is 45 minutes. As the subject must remain focused throughout the test, he is advised to take breaks as soon as they experience symptoms of fatigue.

### 3.5 Data analysis and processing

The plots collected from the 20 subjects have more or less complex patatoid shapes and cannot be analyzed in their raw state. Data processing is necessary to retrieve statistically analyzable descriptors. Examples of drawings are provided in Appendix B. Based on the general appearance of the shapes obtained and to simplify the analysis, we consider that they can be approximated by ellipses. The analysis can thus be carried out on the different parameters of the ellipses. For each extract and for each instrument, we determine:

- the number of additional perceived sources, an indicator of the presence of phantom sources, calculated from the number of plots drawn. Each instrument is described by at least one plot, so only additional plots are counted.
- azimuth and elevation localization errors, calculated from the position of the centre of gravity of the ellipses relative to the actual position of the sources.
- the perceived width of the instrument, calculated from the product  $a \times b$  of the major axis  $a$  by the minor axis  $b$  of the ellipse. In the case where several plots have been made for the same instrument, the sum of the ellipses areas is calculated.

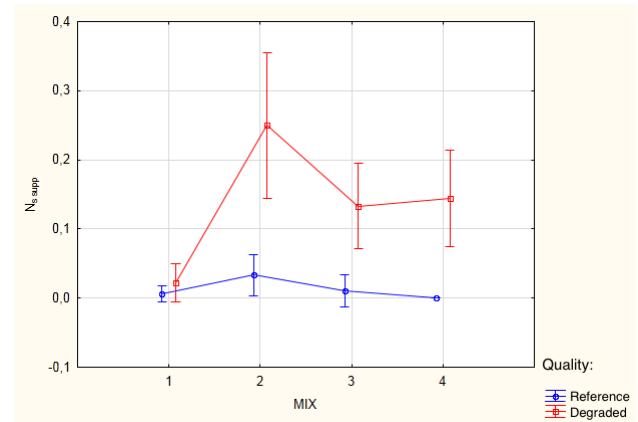
Each descriptor is averaged over the 3 repetitions of each condition. A repeated measures ANOVA is conducted, based on the 8 test conditions. It is an ANOVA with two intra-subject factors: the type of mix (4 levels: 4 different extracts) and quality (2 levels: reference quality and degraded quality). In addition, post-hoc tests is carried out to determine the presence of interactions between factors.

## 4. RESULTS

The general results for all descriptors are presented in the present section. The effects of the quality and the type of mix are finally described on three descriptors as elevation

localization error doesn't vary significantly across test conditions.

### 4.1 Effects on the number of additional sources perceived



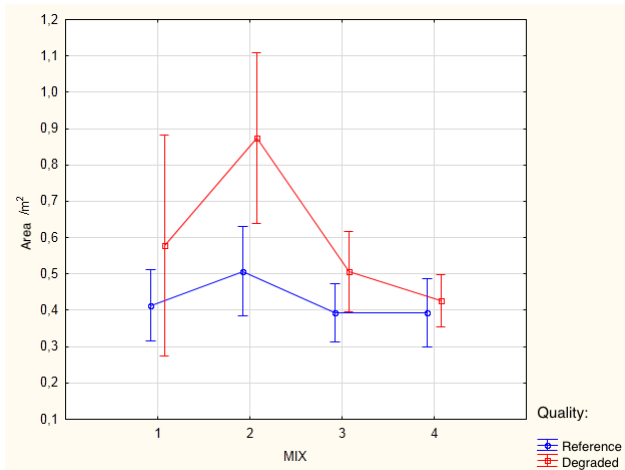
**Figure 4.** Cross effects of quality and mix type on the number of additional sources perceived. The red squares and blue dots represent the average value.  $N_{ssupp}$  corresponds the average of additional sources obtained for all subjects, instruments and repetitions of an extract broadcast in a given quality.

The effects of quality and mix type on the number of additional sources perceived are shown in Fig. 4. ANOVA revealed significant effects of quality ( $QUAL : F_{1,19} = 27,643, p \leq 0,001$ ), and mix type ( $MIX : F_{3,57} = 12,390, p \leq 0,001$ ) on this descriptor. The number of perceived phantom sources is significantly higher in the case of degraded scenes than in the case of reference scenes. There is also a significant interaction between quality and mix type ( $F_{3,57} = 10.469, p \leq 0.001$ ). This interaction reflects the fact that the effect of quality varies greatly from one mix to another. Indeed, as shown on Fig. 4 ghost sources are heard much more frequently for mix 2 than for the others. Mix 1, on the other hand, presented almost no additional sources.

### 4.2 Effects on the perceived source width

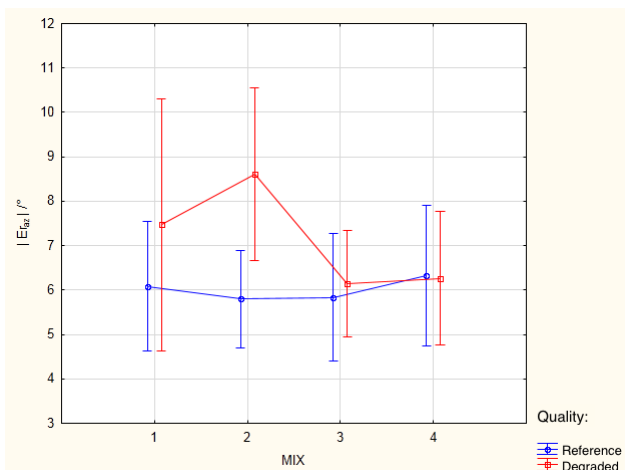
The quality and type of mix also have a significant influence on the perceived width of the instruments, as shown in Fig. 5. The ANOVA gives for quality  $QUAL : F_{1,19} = 8.4072, p \leq 0.01$  and for mix type  $MIX : F_{3,57} = 7.1599, p \leq 0.005$ . According to Fig. 5, degraded sources are perceived on average to be larger than intact sources. It can also be noted that the width estimation is subject to great variability. This figure also highlights the differences on the estimated area of the instruments as a function of the mix type. It appears that on average the instruments of mix 2 were perceived to be larger than those of the other extracts. Extract n1 is not significantly different from the others, however, the evaluation of the width of its sources is subject to great variations from one individual to another.





**Figure 5.** Cross effects of quality and mix type on perceived source width.

### 4.3 Effects on azimuth localization error



**Figure 6.** Cross effects of quality and mix type on azimuthal localization error.

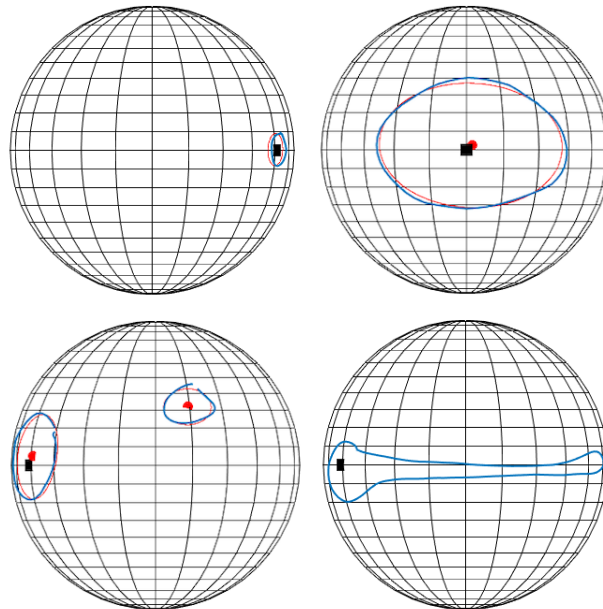
The results of the ANOVA for azimuthal localization error are shown in figure Fig. 6. Only quality has a significant influence on this descriptor ( $F_{1,19} = 4.9737, p \leq 0.05$ ). The azimuthal localization error is on average 6 for the reference versions and 7 for the degraded versions. This difference is relatively small regarding general human localization performances in the azimuthal plane. No significant variation in azimuth error is observed depending on the type of mix.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment shows perceptible differences between sound scenes composed by separated sources and clean sound scenes. First, the number of perceived phantom sources increases significantly in degraded scenes. This is due to the fact that the source separation process generates distortions such as rejections. That is, since the source estimation is not perfect, portions of

the signal from one source can be attributed to the other sources of the mixture. In a spatial remix context, this means that portions of the target source are broadcast on several channels simultaneously. When the rejections are very different from the source signal in terms of temporal and spectral envelopes, the listener perceives several distinct sources [12] and in this particular case it is perceived has one main source and one or more phantom sources. Percussive instruments characterized in the time-frequency domain by short time activation and wide frequency distribution are very susceptible to rejection problems. It should be noted that phantom sources are not necessarily perceived at the position of the sources in which the rejections appear. Generally speaking, they were perceived as high and very volatile, which made their location tedious.

Second, this study reveals that the sources have been generally perceived as broader in the case of scenes degraded by source separation. The presumed reasons for this enlargement are diverse. Source rejections seem to be a plausible cause of this expansion. Indeed, Blauert [10] showed that if two coherent sources are broadcast simultaneously, they can be perceived as one large source depending on their coherence level. If rejections are coherent enough the result can be perceived as one large source. Moreover, it seems that the poor estimation of impulse responses at low frequency for the initialization of the separation algorithm has an influence on source widening since it has mainly been observed for low frequency instruments (e.g. the bass part of mix 2).



**Figure 7.** Examples of plots made by subjects. Black squares: real position of the source, blue curves: drawn plots, red curves: fitting ellipses, red dots: center of ellipses. From left to right and top to bottom: source perceived as punctual, source perceived as wide, additional source perceived and source perceived as unstable.

Finally, according to the results, separation artifacts

lead to a slight increase in the azimuth localization error. This is linked to enlargement and the perceived instability of position for some sources. Indeed, on the one hand when the sources are large, the estimation of the position of the source's barycentre is more imprecise and on the other hand when the sources position is unstable, it is difficult to judge a central position of the source. Some subjects have managed in their drawings to account for this phenomenon (see Fig. 7) but the elliptical approximation of these plots is no longer appropriate. In addition, the reporting method implemented proved to be effective and particularly well adapted to the task the subjects were to perform. However, the diversity of the cases presented is not fully represented by this method. For example, it does not distinguish the case of an extended source from the case of a source with an unstable position.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our study revealed that a source separation process could lead to perceptible degradations in the spatial image of spatialized musical sound scenes. Three types of degradation were observed. In the majority of degraded cases, we see the emergence of "phantom" sources, an increase in the perceived width of the sources and an increase in the error made in the localization task. Percussive or harmonic rejections seems to be one cause of disturbance in the spatial image. On the other hand, the approximation of the impulse responses used to initialize the separation algorithm may have negative impact on the estimation of target sources at low-frequency. Therefore, to have an accurate restitution of the spatial image from separate sources, it would be necessary, according to this study, to minimize the error in estimating the impulse responses of the different sources and to reduce the rejection rate.

In addition, the study was conducted on subjects with different profiles and different listening skills. Some subjects were not sensitive to differences in conditions. Others, on the contrary, paid particular attention to the details of the sound scenes. It would therefore be interesting to further characterize the degradation, by running this test on an expert audience of spatialized listening. In the future, other sound examples could be studied, in particular examples that are more difficult to solve for the source separation algorithm, such as scenes composed exclusively of instruments with similar timbres (*e.g.* string quartet), percussion ensembles or environmental sounds. We chose as a first study to focus on a simple case of spatialization: with no virtual sources. A new experiment would consist in studying the performance of other spatialization techniques such as VBAP or HOA in a context of restitution of sound scenes resulting from a separation process.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was made possible thanks to the help of Simon Leglaive, Roland Badeau and Gaël Richard from LTCI - Télécom ParisTech, who provided us with the audio source separation algorithm used for this study.

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