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Jean-Baptiste Masson

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Field Recording, Technology and Creative Listening

Abstract. While more and more used in music and sound art, field recording remains under theorised. This paper aims to study this practice in relation to the technology and to modes of listening. I argue that field recording cannot be thought without its technological tools: microphones, headphones, recorders and speakers. I discuss that this set of audio technologies acts as a way of ‘translating’ the environment by allowing for a detachment toward what is listened to. I also conceptualise listening as a creative stance. To support my claim, I deploy historical examples from the sound hunting movement alongside recent scholarly works that investigate the role of imagination and empathy in music extending this method to ambient sounds. Finally, I argue that field recording can be used as a method to engage creatively with the environment.

Jean-Baptiste MASSON¹

Keywords. *Field Recording, Listening, Sound Environment, Technology, Link*

Definition and a Very Brief History of Field Recording

Arguably originating in bird song recordings made by the young Ludwig Koch in 1889, field recordings were mainly used by ornithologists, ethnomusicologists and radio during the first half of the twentieth century. During the second part of the twentieth century, facilitated by battery-powered recorders, making recording became a hobby known in Western Europe under the name of ‘sound hunting’, with tape recording clubs, national and international contests and federations emerging to define the practice². Field recording was also used to showcase the performances of high-fidelity systems - with Emory Cook using his recordings of trains, the ocean and the Queen Mary’s horn to demonstrate the quality of his speakers and turntables³. During the 1970s field recording further developed, notably around recording of nature and everyday life, and involved people like Luc Ferrari, Irv Teibel and Syntonic Research Inc., the World Soundscape Project, Dan Gibson, among others⁴. From here, field recording started to develop as a distinct musical genre.

But what are we listening to in field recordings? And how are we listening to it?

1. University of York, White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities, United Kingdom, jm2441@york.ac.uk

2. For the development of a sound hobby in Britain, see Jean-Baptiste Masson, “Hunting Sounds: The Development of a Sound Recording Hobbyist Culture in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Unlikely, Journal of Creative Arts* 7, in press.

3. John M. Conly, “Brahms, Thunderheads and Cachalot Courtship,” *High Fidelity*, October 1954, 49-51, 128, 130, 132.

4. Luc Ferrari composed *Presque Rien n°1* between 1967 and 1970, Syntonic Research Inc. released the first volume of its *Environments* series in 1969, the World Soundscape Project was initiated that same year, Dan Gibson’s *Solitudes* series started in 1981.

Technology as a Translator

As a mediated contact with the world, field recording is only thinkable through microphones, recorders, amplifiers, cables, speakers, headphones, and now, most of the time, computer. Field recording present a form of technology mediated contact with a sonic ambiance, mediated modes of listening of the world. This opens several questions: on the technical side, *how* is it recorded and then listened to; and on the philosophical one, *what* is recorded and listened to.

One does not hear the same thing with naked ears as through a microphone and speakers or headphones. These last ones follow technical characteristics elaborated beforehand while the human ear evolve though time, both physiologically (as illustrated by the impact of ageing) and psychologically (that is, its dependencing on training, increase of resolution, discrimination and development of specific listening modes). The presence of the microphone or speaker as an interface creates and allows a detachment toward the sound source, which allows a renewed perception, something of which field recordists observe⁵. Audio technologies help to work one's ear by allowing specific focus and detachment from sound sources. They thus act as a translator to break into the listening habits that render the real "so boring" (Jullien, 2019, 66) - because one has stopped taking interest in it - to access the unheard of the mundane, unheard because of "the very fact that it continuously lies before my eyes and as such, is no longer perceive" (Jullien, 2019, 24). Both for the recordist and for the listener, microphone, headphones, speakers and records allow to become aware of what is silenced by our experience, to renew the perception of the sound environment, to finally find the beauty in the banal. The microphone is a tool that raises awareness of sound. Moreover, specific microphones can render audible sounds that are not accessible to the human ear (like accelerometers to detect vibrations or sounds in the ultrasonic range), and through the means of amplification, even the most discreet sounds become hearable. Audio technologies and field recording have participated, and still participate, in the establishment of a new listening habitus. Judith Becker coined this concept to say that "we listen in a particular way without thinking about, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening" (Becker, 2010, 130). Field recording is consequently a way in which people become aware of how they listen to the sound environment and of how to listen to the sound environment. Through practice, ordinary sounds are translated into objects worth listening to and recording. Coupled with the repeated listenings allowed by the record, audio technologies help to decontextualize what is heard, and help to achieve the 'reduced listening' called for by Pierre Schaeffer, when one focus on the sonic qualities of sound rather than on its cause or meaning⁶. In that sense, the translation operated by audio technologies is an education of the ear, the development of a peculiar mode of listening.

Creative Listening

Field recordists, both professional and amateur, developed new encultured techniques of listening to the sound environment, from a detachment brought by the microphone, to a detachment directly enacted by the listener. "[Sound hunting] was not just a matter of simply waving the microphone around willy-nilly. On the contrary, a fully trained sound scout will be a professional listener" (Harris, 1967, 13). That is to say, as a listener opened to the sound environment, they were able to distinguish

5. See the interviews in Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle, *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording* (Axminster: Uniform Books, 2014).

6. Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects. An Essay Across Disciplines* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017 [1966]), 212-4.

specific qualities in the heard sounds - such as texture, rhythm, harmony, movement or timbre to name a few - qualities that lie beyond, or more probably below, their significations. This listener is also able to jump between contemplation of the details within a sound scene, to an appraisal of its global quality. By which even the mundane sounds and environments become interesting to listen to, blurring the limits between noise, sound and music.

The sounds of a train climbing through the countryside, for instance, can be likened to a symphony in three movements, played without a break: first, pianissimo, the birdsong and a distant whistle emphasise the silence out of which the train is heard approaching, perhaps with a brief and abrupt change of tempo when the wheels slip; the train comes closer at a steady and now slower tempo, reaches a crescendo as it passes by, then climbs away into the distance, now pianissimo again, with maybe a long, lonely whistle as a coda. Sounds such as these are surely as evocative as a musical composition and can be equally emotive (Handford, 1980, 9).

This “fully trained sound scout” has acquired the ability to establish an aesthetic relation with ambient sounds, to give them musical qualities, to listen to them as one listens to music. Such an experience was also described by Brian Eno, when he recorded random sounds around Hyde Park and Bayswater Road for some minutes, listened to them and tried to memorise them. “I found that you can learn it. Something that is as completely arbitrary and disconnected as that, with sufficient listenings, become highly connected. You can really imagine that this thing was constructed somehow” (Toop, 1995, 130). This highlights the role of the listener in the appreciation of the proposition offered by a field recording piece, and the role of one’s imagination. As put by Marcel Cobussen, “imagination is a necessary quality when listening” (Cobussen, 2019, 116). I want to extend this notion by proposing that the same requirement to deploy the imagination occurs when one listens to the sound environment. Despite Cobussen taking instrumental sounds as his point of departure, I claim that ambient sounds also stimulate the imagination, as the two above examples of Peter Handford and Brian Eno show. A narrative, in real time or reconstructed, can be drawn from the ambient sounds.

“As a creative act, listening is always already somehow attached to the imaginary. However, this *imagining-through-listening* is to a certain extent determined - and perhaps restricted - by the sonic input and, sometimes, by the sound sources” (Cobussen, 2019, 116). Or maybe it is the education that restricts the imagination that one is able to project within her listening? Those restrictions are largely cultural and dependent on what is accepted as noise, sound and music and on the level of interest that is projected into each of these categories. I have shown elsewhere how such an interest toward ambient sounds appeared among amateur recordists practicing field recording in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s⁷. Field recording works on the blurring of noise, sound and music, to make clear that their definitions are circumstantial. It is one’s curiosity and personal opinion at a particular moment that makes a sound noticeable and interesting to listen to. But this one is neutral. It is the position heralded by John Cage as early as 1937: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating” (Cage, 1961, 3). Adapting the work of Eric Clarke on empathy and music, I want to

7. J.-B. Masson, “Hunting Sounds.”

suggest that ambient sound too act as medium for extended consciousness⁸. Curiosity and empathy allow a connection with what is listened to. Curiosity as the first step of focus, where one gives interest and creates a link, allowing then an empathic relation to emerge and to sustain that link by projecting one's personality or identifying oneself with the object of contemplation. Through the use of empathy, I want to stress the importance of the establishment of a link between the listener and something or someone external to him. This approach allows the highlighting of the agency of sound, and the inter-related agencies of sound and of the listener. I propose that it is through these inter-related agencies that listening is creative. This creative aspect happening on several levels: the creation of a link with something that is external to oneself, the creation of emotions and ideas through imagination, the creation of a narrative through time.

Field Recording as a Method

I want to propose that field recording is a discipline. A discipline that teaches a peculiar kind of listening, that is not only active, but creative: listening as an interior and silent act in relationship with the surroundings, sound recordings and sound activities as a way to engage positively with the world. Positively because to listen is to remain silent while being focus on an object of listening: to listen is to create a link and to sustain it, this link creating a relation with something or someone external to oneself with which one empathises. I argue that field recording offers ways to renew how we approach our environment and how we think of ourselves within it, that field recording offers ways to approach Steven Feld's questions: "What it means to be a listening agent, and what it means to be a listening subject?" (2013, 212). I have already show avenues to consider why listening is a creative stance and a relational posture with what is around. The relational quality of listening - and through it the field recording practice - is a connection with the Other. Field recording helps to become conscious about what we hear, and therefore to experience the environment more intensively. A curiosity toward sound is also a curiosity toward the world, and because of this relational quality, field recording can be a method to engage with what lies around, sound being a medium within which we are constantly immersed. The environment is a milieu in which we are constantly "ensounded" (Ingold, 2007, 12). The purpose of field recording, and what one can learn through it, is to make sense of this constant 'ensounding'. Thus, the adaptation of what Clarke writes about music to ambient sounds, to consider them as "both a *medium* for emphatic (or antagonistic) engagement [...], and an *environment* in which to explore and experiment with a range of more or less projected, fantasized, and genuinely discovered subject positions or social formations" (Clarke, 2019, 79)⁹. Such an approach opens up to the social and political influences of one's culture of listening, through the acceptance or denial of certain sounds and their emitters. Listening is a reflexive activity that equally informs on the what is listened to and on the listener. Also highlighted is the strong relation between listening, field recording and acoustic ecology, and how this particular musical genre can serve to a better awareness of what lies and lives around us.

Conclusion

Field recording offers rich avenues to renew our perception of the sound environment, through recordings, and through direct practice. Audio technologies, because they act

8. Eric Clarke, "Empathy and the Ecology of Musical Consciousness," in *Music and Consciousness 2*, ed. Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, Eric Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 71-92.

9. *Emphases in original text.*

as a translator of the sound environment, can facilitate this transformation, that can be sustained without it afterwards. I have developed the idea that listening is a creative stance and that ambient sounds can trigger imagination. Listening is a link with something external. As such, its reason is relational, and these relations can be emphasized or antagonized. A key component that I have introduced is curiosity, and this short article is the first step to propose an exploration of curiosity as an essential movement to positively react to our constant *ensounding*. A curiosity toward ambient sound is a curiosity toward the world. Listening cannot be separated from the other senses and, therefore, by analysing how field recording create new modes of listening, its study and practice can serve as an entry point for a rehabilitated contact with the world.

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