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Second-Order Ambiances

Background Music Transforming Public Spaces

Heikki UIMONEN¹

Abstract. Background music is affected by social, legal, economic and technological factors. It is intended to be listened to inattentively and is predominantly selected by someone other than those who encounter it. The ACMESOCS (2019-2022) research project examines urban auditory cultures, particularly how they are articulated, experienced and reclaimed within the acoustic environments of different-sized cities, thus contributing to policy-makers' awareness of the aesthetic design of acoustic spaces and the defining of urban sonic identity. This paper presents the preliminary results of a case study carried out in selected enterprises located in an individual shopping mall. It concentrates on the preferences of the end-users of background music and on their possibilities for alternative individual acoustic design.

Keywords. Ubiquitous Music, Ambiances, Acoustic Design, Sonic Environment, Identity, Media

Introduction

When urbanites stroll through a mid-sized Nordic shopping mall, they encounter approximately one hundred shops with diverse ambiances composed of background music. Although characterised as “second-order economy” (Sterne, 2013), background music is affected not only by economic but also social, legal, technological and cultural factors. Also, this ubiquitous music is intended to be listened to inattentively and is predominantly selected by someone other than those who encounter it, which makes it a special sonic and musical phenomenon to be researched only by conventional analysis of place.

Sonic environments perceived and understood by individuals or societies are defined as soundscapes. The term, invented in the early 1970s, was recently given an ISO-standardised definition in Europe (COST 2016). The concept parallels the idea of ambiance, which also emphasises how people experience everyday sonic phenomena. Various public places have essentially acoustic dimensions: restaurants, markets, sports arenas and shopping malls consist of sounds, whether musical or environmental. These phenomena have interested sociologists, ethnomusicologists and urban planners in their research of mobile and sedentary music in various urban spaces and soundscapes in historical, contemporary, personal, architectural and commercial contexts (Sterne, 1997, DeNora, 2000, Bull, 2002 & 2013, Thibaud, 2003, Thompson, 2002, Blesser and Salter, 2006). Furthermore, the interest in music in everyday soundscapes is exemplified by *Auditory Culture Reader* (Bull and Back, 2000) and *Hearing Cultures* (Erlman, 2005), anthologies presenting academic viewpoints on the matter.

Technologies and their social uses construct people's relationship to their environments.

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When music technology and its economic applications affect our conceptions of the nature of music, it can be approached as an ontological question: how, when, where and under what circumstances does music exist, in other words, “what music is remains open to question at all times and in all places” (Bohman, 1999). The question can be expanded further by asking what meanings an identical piece of music can have while listened to in different situations and environments open to the general public.

Project ACMESOCS

ACMESOCS: Auditory Cultures, Mediated Sounds and Constructed Spaces (2020) is a research project examining urban auditory cultures, particularly how they are articulated, experienced and reclaimed within the acoustic environments of three different-sized cities. ACMESOCS is based on cultural and social meanings attached to musical sounds when experienced in indoor urban environments, with special attention to the concepts of place, music and the listener. Three parameters are co- and re-produced continuously in their transforming and triangular relationship.

Based on prior academic research and previous studies of soundscapes, music consumption and the social uses of music, ACMESOCS divides the empirical research into three strands: the historical development of the background music industry, the construction of the contemporary sonic environment and the use of individual meaning-making in the context of commercial environments. On a methodological level, the research uses social science methods including participatory observation and interviews combined with soundscape studies methods. The strands are as follows: *the Making of the Listener-Consumer* aiming to understand strategic thinking within the background/foreground music business that underwent several shifts in the latter half of the 20th century. The listener-consumer is the implied central figure in the strategies, generating useful conceptions of the music listener and the all-important patron, the consumer. The strand *Constructed Urban Soundscapes* researches ubiquitous music (Kassabian, 2013) in urban spaces, which are sonically constructed mostly by the private and public service terrestrial radio stations and the content of the online background music services. Digital music streaming companies are expanding their business strategies into background music industry, thus increasing the competition for, and transformation of, shared soundscapes. The strand *Experienced and Reclaimed Soundscapes* concentrates on people’s experiences, perceptions and actions due to ubiquitous music in diverse urban spaces. The spaces are sometimes reclaimed by grassroots-level personal and collective acoustic design enabled by visual and auditory media content.

Methodology and Data Collection

This paper concentrates on the strand *Constructed Urban Soundscapes* and presents a case study of mediated music in a shopping mall environment. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic of spring 2020, the entire research was reorganised and the documentation of the fieldwork sites postponed. As a result, the research data collected prior to the pandemic and its preliminary analysis will be presented.

The article sheds light on and presents preliminary results concerning preferences of background music end-users, background music selection processes and alternatives to individual acoustic design in diverse shops and diverse lines of business. This research pays specific attention to a qualitative inquiry of how end-users are or are not capable of changing their sonic environment if they desire to do so. This intriguing scholarly question in the context of controlling one’s working environment and its acoustic dimensions will be underlined in the research.

During the fieldwork, the data on the musical preferences of end-users while working and ways to have an impact on their daily music environment was collected. The fieldwork methodology was composed of questionnaires, music recognition and interviews with open-ended questions in *Koskikeskus* shopping mall in the city of Tampere, Finland on 17-19 February (online-questionnaire) and 2-4, 13, 18, 23-24 May 2020 (interviews and music recognition) by ACMESOCS project researchers. During the fieldwork, the background music disseminated in individual shops was documented and archived with the Shazam phone app and made available to Spotify (2020) for anyone who desires to get acquainted with it, thus following the principles of open availability of research data. At this point, the shopping mall's hallways' sonic environment composed of generative music (music generated on-site by a programme in accordance with given parameters), announcements and advertisements were excluded from the research due to their different nature compared to the individual and identifiable songs documented in the shops.

Data and Preliminary Results

A total of 66 premises were investigated, their lines of business ranging from offices and cleaning and security enterprises to cafés and restaurants, bookstores, sporting goods, fashion and accessories, beauty, health and well-being, decorating and gifts, entertainment, groceries, household goods and speciality shops.

According to end-users' comments, the music sources of the individual shops consisted of a terrestrial radio receiver (7), other platforms such as iPod (2), self-made playlists (10) and online-disseminated company-specific playlists (subcontracted, 30). A total of 7 premises were without music, and in 10 of the shops the end-users were not able - or perhaps willing - to divulge the source of their music. Most of the shops investigated were fashion and accessories shops (25) with music predominantly composed of self-made playlists and company-specific playlists.

According to end-users' responses, the multinational and domestic retail chains' music selection processes were predominantly centralised. Especially in clothing and accessory stores, the music design and music selection processes were subcontracted to international background music companies. The documented music of the individual shops consisted of a total of 45 songs, 40 of which were performed by popular Anglo-American music artists such as Adele, Lisa Stansfield, Supertramp, Danielle Knoll and Robert Gordon (Spotify 2020).

When asked to describe freely the background music of their shops, the end-users characterised it as "rock," "pop," "English," "light," "relaxed," "schlager," "youthful," "suitable for all age groups," "trendy," "neutral," "classic popular music," "hiphop," "house," "soul" and music that "suits the brand" (Acme 2020), which gives the impression that the shopping mall's everyday background music is quite diverse when evaluated as a whole. When asked, what do you think of your workplace's background music, it was described somewhat nonchalantly as "OK," "nice," "neutral," "I don't care," "background noise, I don't even hear it," "lounge music is good since it does not stick in your head" and "would be bored without it" (Acme 2020). At first glance, the answers seem to reflect the general idea of background music, that it should go unnoticed. However, it also turned out, that reacting to background music was not restricted to occasional comments, since it was also sung along and sometimes danced to. The functional aspects of background music were also raised by one interviewee stating that it covered the hallway's generative music. Characterising background music as "earworm songs" refers to a catchy tune, which tends to play recurrently in a person's memory whether they like or not.

In general, during the ordinary working day, the background music was commented sparsely in the shops apart from occasional remarks such as “oh, it’s the same song again.” The notable exception to this rule was Christmas-time. Videogame and entertainment software retailer GameStop’s female interviewee stated that, according to the shop personnel’s count, the song “Last Christmas” by Wham was heard eleven times during a 7½-hour work shift. In addition to that, shop’s male workers’ outspoken liking of “alternative music” and their inclinations to give somewhat “harsh” comments on music were mentioned (Acme 2020). Another clearly identity-related statement was heard from a male interviewee pointing out that “we’re playing music for the girls now,” and pondered if this was suitable background music for a male clothes store and “men don’t bother to listen to this kind of music.”

Almost half the end-users (30) said that they had no control over the selection of background music. A practice prominent in chain stores with centralised music selection was that, in order to have the song removed from the playlist, headquarters or the background music provider had to be contacted by email (Acme 2020). In some cases, the shop personnel did not necessarily like the background music, but were reluctant to take any action or could not be bothered to change the playlist. The unspoken rule was to keep the volume of unpopular music down although it was recognised that “the boss” had to pay for it anyway. Cultural aspects were also raised, and the amount of non-Finnish music played in comparison with Finnish-language releases was questioned.

Conclusions

Theoretically and methodologically, ACME SOCS draws from the premise that environmental and especially musical sounds are the result of human actions in different spaces. This is approached by understanding places of music from an ethnomusicological point of view as music cultures consisting of ideas, actions, institutions and material objects. By doing this, in the future the project aims to contribute to environmental planning and the administration of urban areas, the aesthetic design of acoustic spaces and defining urban sonic identity.

This case study in a shopping mall particularly focused on digitalisation, the centralised background music industry and media convergence transforming commercial premises sonically, and on how this transformation is experienced and represented by the end-users. The qualitative research method applied elucidated on the individual and collective meanings attached to centralised music selection and possible alternatives for individual acoustic design.

In terms of urban sonic identity, uniquely personal areas are hard to find in a shopping mall environment. However, functional issues of acoustic design were raised when background music was commented on as a way to cover the hallway music. It also turned out that the design of acoustic spaces and defining urban sonic identity are not merely physical but related to issues of personal musical taste, identity and meaning-making constructed in social encounters (see DeNora, 2000). These encounters were clearly represented when individual and collective music tastes were characterised by comments relating to “alternative music” or “girls’ music.”

Background music is part of the daily environment and existence and has an effect on the everyday existence of the end-user of music. Preliminary results showed that hand-picked playlists are one route to individual and personalized acoustic design and that removing a song from a playlist could be done by contacting the music-providing enterprise. For chain stores, this seems to make music selection more hierarchical,

slower and perhaps somewhat cumbersome compared to enterprises that allow local music selection. At the same time, a hypothesis can be formulated that chain store background music practices are at least to some extent identical, with only minor exceptions.

In future research, the concept of agency requires closer examination in the context of music selection. The acoustic design of the chain stores is first and foremost in the hands of the music provider, and the end-users are seldom responsible for their daily sonic environment. This requires further inquiries into music selection processes and overall acoustic design carried out by the background music companies, including their customers' preferences and how they are taken into account in both the material and the infrastructural framework.

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