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Ascolto il tuo cuore, città

Listening to My City at the Time of COVID-19

Giuseppe GAVAZZA¹

Abstract. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I suddenly decided to record the sounds of my apartment and my quarter, a lively community in the center of Turin: shops, outdoor markets, bars and restaurants in the day; cinemas, theaters, pubs in the night; the Valentino park, a big green area in the center of Turin on the Po river and the Porta Nuova train station. The soundwalks and the soundscapes I realized daily through the months of lockdown will continue as an online work in progress that allows for a sound exploration of this environment in this period and context. Many things have visibly changed: but is the change even audible? The same unpredictable changes imposed by the emergency have stimulated me to remodel the project that is proposed here in a renewed participatory approach.

Keywords. Soundwalk, Soundscape, COVID-19 Lockdown, Participatory Art Project

The Title

I have decided to borrow from Alberto Savinio the title *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*² (1984) for this cycle of urban recordings in the COVID-19 confinement period.

Painter, composer, musicologist, writer, brother of the much better-known Giorgio De Chirico but not less genial than him, in this book, Savinio *flâneur* narrates his Milan. Published in 1944, the text presents itself as a testimony of Milan after the bombings of the Second World War: an anthology of reportages of walks around the city, chapters characterized by explanatory titles somewhat as intriguing and eccentric as their author was. Milan, like a phoenix, rose from the rubble of the city.

I have chosen this wonderful title for my *flânerie sonores* around my city, Turin, in the confined space of the San Salvario neighborhood, where I have lived for 30 years, in a period certainly not as tragic as a war, but still difficult and strange in the almost curfew imposed by the restrictions and lockdown due to the pandemic emergency. These reports were made by boosting my listening skills with my portable digital audio recorder in my pocket and binaural microphones in my ears.

On the web page³ of the French version, you can read a quote from the book: “In the ambition to make ‘an *oeuvre*’, there is still childishness. Once this childishness is

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2. “I listen to your heart, city.”

3. See at: <http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Le-sentiment-geographique/Ville-j-ecoute-ton-coeur> Accessed on June 21, 2020.

understood and overcome, you only write books if you still feel like writing, in the form of a long, quiet conversation⁴.”

In this spirit, I intended my soundwalks and my soundscapes as a long, quiet and intimate conversation with the spaces. Listening to the voices of the environment, adding the discreet voice of my footsteps, and my breath (atmos) in a rediscovery of the well-known, with an attitude, as well as possible, near to that of a forced newfound *naïveté* (naivety).

My Work

Since Tuesday, March 10th (the first day of confinement Phase I: *La flânerie aux temps du COVID-19: Soundwalk, Chapter I*) until Monday, June 15th (*Posting postcards, day 1 of phase 3, at the time of COVID-19: Soundwalk, Chapter CVIII*) first day of phase III, I have made at least one recordings per day of my soundwalks - around my quarter, in the legal radius of about 200 meters (the self-certification sheet in my pocket: it is an exit due to my work!) - and of my soundscapes taken from my terrace. 108 day-by-day recordings over 97 days.

Recording n°108 marks the end of my phase A and the beginning of my phase B, in which I interrupted the daily cadence of the recordings to start a different, slower pace marked by reinterpretations of previous chapters looking for similar situations (days, times, spaces, ambiances, occurrences, ...): this happens in the days I am writing this text.

Phase III means return to normal: I hope so, we warmly hope so. And from this newfound normality, I will continue to document recordings (soundwalks and soundscapes, explanatory titles, geotagged paths, related photos, short descriptive texts), hopefully useful to infer something of this strange time that was the confinement and the emergency.

On the page of each of my files on the Aporee website (see below about the full list) you can find links to GPS geotrack files in .kmz, .kml, .gpx formats: these files can be viewed with Google Earth or other programs and web pages. You can listen and follow the relative walks made to date to the links below. All these audios and geotrack files are available on my account www.aporee.org as part of my personal program “Ascolto il tuo cuore, città. I listen to your heart, city” itself part of the larger shared project “Soundscapes in the Pandemic/Corona”⁵ a large archive dedicated to sounds recorded worldwide in the COVID-19 pandemic emergency.

The sounds appear labeled on a terrestrial map. By following the links, you can open the map: clicking on the flashing red dot opens a drop-down window with information about the recording. In some cases, there are several sounds, loaded at different times, corresponding to the same recording point. In this case, by clicking on the blinking red dot and opening the drop-down window, you can read titles and information of different sounds and choose which of the list to listen to.

On a dedicated page of a personal blog, you can get the complete list of my finished phase A and in progress phase B recordings⁶.

4. “ Dans l’ambition de faire “une œuvre”, il y a encore de la puérilité. Une fois cette puérilité comprise et dépassée, on n’écrit de livres, si on a encore envie d’écrire, qu’en forme de longue et tranquille conversation. ” personal translation.

5. See at: <https://aporee.org/maps/work/projects.php?project=corona>

6. See at: <https://terpress.blogspot.com/2020/03/audio-testimonianze-al-tempo-del-covid19.html>

Technical Equipment

For the larger part of recordings, I used a Zoom H2n (in a few cases a Tascam DR-100MKIII); audio file format is stereo (rare four channels), wav 24 bits, 48 kHz, converted to stereo MP3 320 kbit/s for the Aporee website where I have downloaded sound files of about 30' at about 1-hour duration. I often made a selection of longer original recordings; obviously, I archived all the complete original files.

I made soundwalks mainly with binaural microphones Soundman OKM II classic; in very few cases I used binaural microphones Roland CS-10EM.

I made the soundscapes recordings with Zoom or Tascam internal microphones, from five positions on my terrace, placing the recorders on a stand at a height of about 230 cm.

Location

Quartiere San Salvario, Torino

Circoscrizione 8

Surface: 2,46 km²

Inhabitants: 38 110 ab.

Population density: 15 491,87 ab./km²

Coordinates: 45° 03'20"N 7° 40'47"E

Geo coordinates: 45,058022, 7,685715

<https://binged.it/39EFY5Q>

<https://her.is/3aGuLmE>

<https://goo.gl/maps/8Qj6FUZDow7Y71iQA>

The Soundwalks: the San Salvario District

San Salvario is a historic district of the Circoscrizione 8 of Turin, located south-east of the historic center. The district is also known for its widespread multi-ethnic population, present especially near the Porta Nuova train station.

It is one of the greenest central districts of Turin: in its part close to the left bank of the Po river, there is the Valentino Park, conceived as the summer residence park of the Savoy family (the royal family of the Kingdom of Italy from 1861 to 1947), now used as a public park, full of pedestrian paths, clubs and bars, it hosts the homonymous castle, from 1997 UNESCO World Heritage Site, today the headquarters of the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic of Turin, and the picturesque Medieval Village. The western part is made up of narrow streets and old houses, close to Via Madama Cristina, Via Nizza and the railway section of Porta Nuova.

The district hosts a variety of cultural, craft, and tertiary activities in general. At the end of the 20th century, a lively nightlife developed. In addition to multi-ethnic venues, pubs, bistros, restaurants, and delicatessens of all kinds and ethnic groups, the neighborhood is home to two local outdoor markets. The Turin daily newspaper *La Stampa*, one of the largest nationwide, has its headquarters here. In addition to the cultural venues already mentioned, the district also houses the *Museum of criminal anthropology Cesare Lombroso* and the *Museum of human anatomy Luigi Rolando*, plus the *Fruit Museum Francesco Garnier Valletti*, the *Teatro Nuovo*, the *Cinetatro Baretti*, and the *Teatro Colosseo*.

In the nineties, the neighborhood saw the birth of dozens of multiethnic socio-cultural associations. In 2010, the agency opened its headquarters at the *Casa del Quartiere* as a recreational, cultural, and multiethnic headquarters.

Since 2013, San Salvario is the subject of redevelopment works for a new university campus, on the project Clinical Industrial Research Park in collaboration with the University Centre Department of Molecular Biotechnology.

The Soundscapes: My Terrace

The audio recording position is in the center of a large terrace located in the inner courtyard of the San Salvatio district (45.05796, 7.68577). The terrace is facing south, on the first floor of a six-story building, surrounded by recent and older buildings from 4 to 10 floors high. The taller and newer buildings are located in the east, the older and lower buildings are to the south.

The west side is almost entirely occupied by the five-story building of *Collegio Universitario Renato Einaudi*, sede *Valentino* (built as *Casa dello Studente* in 1936 on a project by Ferruccio Grassi and Nello Renacco and enlarged after the war); to the north is the six-story building (1953) where I live.

The skyline decreases from east to west quite regularly: the sun on the terrace rises late but sets not as early.

The terrace is above the garages and around it are other garages or low-rise houses and small gardens or courtyards. This is why the terrace, although on the first floor, is not suffocated by the tall buildings surrounding it but several tens of meters away. Actually, the terrace looks like a square in the middle of houses with many balconies (*Case di ringhiera*) that are visited a lot in this period of confinement: adults, students, children, dogs; but it is not a square at all because it is mainly an enclosing, internal and private system and not a public passage nor a space with public access.

The terrace is L-shaped (the larger part to the south the smaller part to the west) and the north-west side approaches (about 30 meters distance) north to Via Bernardino Galliani, main entrance, and access to the underground garages of the building. Sounds of urban traffic come mainly from this side from a section of the one-way street with slow and not intense traffic, also because a few dozen meters away the street ends, with a stop, on Corso Massimo d'Azeglio, an avenue of great traffic.

The traffic sounds of Corso Massimo d'Azeglio, which is to the east, reach the terrace very muffled by the 10-story building. The buildings to the south and those to the west are something like 50 meters away and absorb a lot of sounds coming from two streets (Via Ormea and Via Berthollet) similar to Via Galliani: one way and not much car traffic, rather pedestrian transit.

My First Project

In my first proposition, thinking about the normal congress situation as planned, I wrote:

“The sound walks and soundscapes recorded so far are a work in progress already available on the web on sites that allow a geotag connection with Google Maps. This will allow an acoustic exploration in space and time of this environment in this period and in this context. [...] Since this is a work in progress that has just begun in an exceptional situation, it is difficult for me to give the details of the intervention. I would imagine that I will propose to you to listen to a reasoned selection of sound samples, suggesting personal interpretations and, above all, trying to provoke a dialogue involving the personal skills and experiences matured at that moment.”

Finale: a Sort of Composition

Given the new rescheduling of *Ambiance 2020 Congress*, I decided to work in a renewed action calling for your collaboration. As of August 16, 2020, there are 75 hours of audio in 125 recordings: 68 soundwalks and 57 soundscapes. The 108 daily recordings in 97 days of phase A (*A tempo rigoroso*) lockdown are followed by two months of phase B (*Rallentando*), in which I added 17 recordings; each is a *variation* of previous recordings.

The soundwalks begin and end in my apartment and are punctuated by recognizable and repeated thematic elements: the radio tuned on RAI-RadioTre, the opening and closing of my door, the building portal, the walk down the stairs to the exit in urban traffic. On the way back, as the *Final cadence*, the washing of the hands: necessary and almost ritual. When you listen, these sound elements present themselves as *Leitmotifs* or, better, as signature tunes for the start and the end of the episode. The radio acts as an index or chronometric witness: all these broadcasts are present in podcasts and allow to check dates and times. Apart from this investigative aspect (of little interest), at the first listening I found the re-listening emotionally remarkable, in particular of the news.

What characterizes this corpus of recordings is the spatial steadiness. The lockdown applied limitations of movement: in the soundwalks, I repeatedly retraced my steps within a small perimeter around my house and the soundscapes from the terrace offer close listening positions. What changes is time, a sonic time-lapse where I intend to search for a constant that I define as *formant*: a spectrum of invariant elements that could identify the voice of this area, through the contingency of extraordinary and ordinary events.

Listening takes a long time; at this phase the partial re-listening does not allow to suggest significant deductions. For this reason, I propose a collaborative project from which, I hope, will spring the details of a compositional creation that I imagine in two directions of intermittent rhythmic linearity (chapters or rooms):

- spatial: an installation in independent acoustic spaces: separate listening rooms⁷ or path with infrared headphones.
- temporal: a series of radio broadcasts that will re-trace the recordings after a period of time (one or more years?). As written above, all recordings are available on the Aporee page.

Everyone may go to the page, explore, read, listen with the aim of select one or more fragments of 4'33." Each fragment is a brick that represents your personal contribution. For each of these fragments I ask you, please, to send me:

- The link to the page;
- The original title of the audio file;
- In case of multiple files at the same URL its location in the file list;
- Your personal, intriguing and eccentric title chosen for the brick;
- The start and end time of the selected fragment;
- A brief listening description;
- The reason for your choice.

For example:

- Page: <https://aporee.org/maps/work/?loc=47786>
- Title: "La flânerie III après trois mois aux temps du COVID-19": Soundwalk
- File n. 3 of the list
- My title: My intriguing New Title
- Selected audio: from 03'10" to 07'43"
- This is what I listen in this fragment;
- This is why I choose this fragment.

⁷ In addition to the geo-track GPS, I documented each recording with pictures that allow to visually contextualize the setting.

My intent is to launch the process for a participative project. I shall use these fragments for:

- An in-person moment of collective brainstorming: workshop, open lesson, workgroup;
- A collaborative project on <https://www.cartophonies.fr>;
- An electroacoustic composition;
- A sound installation.

These chapters should be presented sometimes, somewhere, if possible, in the frame of the Ambiance Network activities.

Please send this material to my email address: gavazza.g@grenoble.archi.fr

Many thanks for your contribution!

Is to be sought a thought that ignores exclusion, so malleable as to receive, according to needs, practical initiatives, vital situations, abstract theories, our being in the world, desires, emotions, cultures...

The result is a sort of collage whose inlay assembles rather than analyzes ... builds more than criticizes. A sort of composition (Serres, Michel)⁸.

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8. 'Sia da cercare un pensiero che ignora l'esclusione, tanto malleabile da accogliere, a seconda dei bisogni, iniziative pratiche, situazioni vitali, teorie astratte, il nostro essere-al-mondo, desideri, emozioni, culture... Ne risulta una sorta di collage il cui intarsio assembla più che analizzare costruisce più che criticare. Una sorta di composizione.' p.348. Personal translation