Notes of a Listener

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Sound is not a medium, nor a mass medium. It is a neutral presence, silent and speechless, so long as you do not actually listen.

Sound is our immaterial environment, just as undeniable as the material, the visible, and just as reticent, so long as we do not project meanings onto it.

In a certain sense the modern sound media – radio, record and tape – have made us conscious for the first time of the self-evidence of sound, by isolating from their natural environment the omnipresent but mostly nondescript sounds that surround us.

Only then, heard within the safe confines of the listener’s room are they conspicuous – the sounds of footsteps, traffic, far away birds, softly rumbling machines – and they lose their self-evidence.

A tape recording deforms, just as records and radio do. You hear a sound that is not created by the medium that appears to produce it. By transporting sound from its original environment to the neutral space of the loudspeaker, these media, disposing of the visible relationship between the sound and its source, alienate the listener from the sound. Everything sounds the same on the radio: tape noise or a waterfall, violin chord or electricity generator. What connects the sounds is neither origin, nor their possible similarities, but the fact that they emerge together from the loudspeaker in the listener’s living room. The medium creates its own reality.

When artists become involved with the reality of the medium, that of electronically transmitted sound, they step into a world that differs fundamentally from the ‘real’ one. A world that is already artificial.

Recorded sounds by their nature are different from ‘real,’ original sounds; they are representations, despite the high degree of reality they suggest. It is precisely the suggestion of authenticity inherent in recorded environmental sounds that often makes artists’
sound works so ambiguous. The ‘precisely real,’ which to a large extent pertains to the media, becomes ‘real’ through the artist’s intervention, but on a completely different level: an artwork, whether consisting of paint or of sounds, requires a different sort of attention than the absent-minded way we habitually absorb our daily environment. We listen differently to music than to sounds from our surroundings.

A musical artwork confronts us. Our acoustic environment surrounds us as passers-by. Though music often shifts from its own category of a consciously experienced work of art to the realm of the acoustic unconscious, (through the sheer abundance of musical information via radios, TVs, CDs, ghetto-blasters and the like) the contrary movement, the use of purely environmental sounds as music, as art, rarely takes place. Yet it seems as simple as John Cage once put it, ‘Open up your window and listen: music!’ But Cage’s open-mindedness is still rare amongst listeners. We demand structure.

The current use of the media is linked to this strict separation between musical and other sound, which is also maintained in everyday life: on a record you hear mostly music, on the radio there is music or speech, and if you happen to hear environmental sounds it’s like a representation of the reality presented to you via the radio.

But what is the sound of splashing and rippling water combined with that of twittering birds, a howling dog and two pile-drivers? Music? A representation of reality? At least it was a composer, Alvin Curran, who arranged these sounds in an exquisitely musical way, structured like a classical four-part sonata or sinfonia. I once asked him about the origins of the different recordings that he had used. He told me where they came from but that it wasn’t of more interest than, say, the origins of the violin:

I am a composer. I arrange sounds, and to me it doesn’t matter if I use a piano or ship-horns and fireworks or recorded environmental sounds. They’re the instruments. The music is what you hear, what you feel.

Although Curran stresses the fact that he is a composer – and rightly so – there is still a significant difference in instrumentation. The sounds he uses in his tape compositions are clearly identifiable as coming from our daily acoustical surroundings. They are not intended to be musical in the first place.

The use of sound media by artists has created a new context for these and suchlike sounds, an artistic space that unites the properties of both musical and everyday contexts. This space is in most cases the listener’s room, the space between the speakers.

And it’s only natural that, when using environmental sounds, composers and artists take the regular output of radio and records as raw material and reintroduce it through the same channels. The sound, especially when derived from the ‘reality’ of the mass media and not recorded at source, has, when returned via these same media, undergone a transformation. The trusty clichés of radio and record, ridiculed, deformed, treated or simply copied but divested of their banal context, can start to function as artwork and exchange their original meaning for a new one supplied by the artist.

Thus the insipid theme of all those old favorite songs that refer to a timeless dream of ideal love becomes, after Bob George’s treatment, a symbol of hard, unfeeling reality. In a sarcastic interpretation of the theme of Talking Back to the Media he sewed two records in half, one with a male voice, the other sung by a woman, both in the same sweet mainstream style. He then glued the halves together to create a ‘classical duet about modern love: androgynous, hasty, direct and unfinished.’ This is a work that, for all its simplicity, immediately undermines the high ideals about communication via the media.

Through continual technical manipulation sound acquires the character of material matter. Sounds, like those on the tape loops used by John Cage in his Rozarti Mix, become palpable objects. Noises like the crying of a baby, a speech by Hitler, a barking dog, symphonic music and environmental sounds are literally ready at hand, as short repetitive events captured on tape. Events can take place on the tape that without this vehicle would be only imaginable, not audible. Whoever has access to the world of audio equipment can profoundly influence the world of natural sound: amplification, slowing-down, weakening, distortion, reversal. Through the manipulations that can be achieved in the studio, sound acquires qualities it never had before.

Sound as object, sound identified with the technical equipment that creates or transmits it, is also inherent in the work of Julius. His delicate networks of wires, plugs, different sized speakers, batteries, buzzers and walkmams, spread over the floor of a gallery, are the perfect image of the sound they produce.

A specific example is the installation that Julius made for docu-
momenta, on the walls and under the neo-classical portico of a large building adjacent to the Kassel Museum Fridericianum. Unemphatic but clearly discernible, a cloud of chirping, grinding, rustling sounds came from the sandstone wall and from under the portico. It gave the impression of a modest swarm of electro-acoustical birds that had settled on top of the columns.

The sound produced by a record by Köpke is tangible in a more ironic sense: drops of molten plastic bring about a broken sound both visibly and audibly. Or listen to Broken Record by Milan Knizak who broke a record into pieces and glued the bits back together creating sharply severed snatches. Just as the cracks in the record are visible, so too, the borders between the fragments of sound are audible.

Both of these records show that the medium is not an ethereal, immaterial concept but literally a carrier. More than that, it is solidified sound that can be handled, conveyed, and made to sound in any place.

Here too, as in the listener’s room, there is alienation. Sound objects arbitrarily have been collected and assembled according to rules that seem to deny the original environment of the sound. What meaning does a single word still have when it is intercepted by a tape recorder and re-worked into a long series of other words? It becomes a concatenation without semantic logic; a music without harmonic structure.

In a work entitled Parole, by the Italian audio artist Maurizio Nannucci, the audible content of the record is a collage of the answers to his question: ‘What is the first word that comes into your mind?’ All these words from passers-by give a picture, not so much of language or speech but of the human voice, puzzled. It’s the sound – hesitating, abrupt, absent-minded, hasty – of men, women and children speaking while still thinking. The timbre of bewildernent links all the words and after a while one forgets their meaning, hearing only the rhythm and the sound motivated by a single association.

In a piece by the British group Audio Arts, a game is played with a cherished tradition in radio-making: the removal of pauses for thinking from recorded interviews. The tape consists of an endless litany of ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ uttered by various people in the course of street interviews. Here, too, fragments of speech are assembled, not to convey a clearly defined meaning, but rather an idea. As the

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artists put it, ‘Ums and ahs could be regarded as succinct audio equivalents to thought outside of language.’ Through the medium of tape recording, pre-existing sounds can be used in a way that denies, distorts or condenses their origin. What remains is just the sound, an object, salvaged from the significant chaos of the everyday decor of sound and functioning as a work of art, provided with another meaning.

‘No question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures, can arise (one is a tourist.)’ Thus John Cage formulated the idea of a seemingly chaotic, but real, environment to which the artist does not have to add anything and that, at most, can be instilled with the codes of the artwork. According to this view, the media are nothing more than instruments, like any other, for producing sound. This is yet another demonstration of the total availability of sound, musical or otherwise, an availability initially made possible by these same media.

When the codes of the artwork are projected onto the medium, as in Cage’s Imaginary Landscape IV, in which twelve radios are played, regardless of what there is to hear on the given frequencies, the mass medium becomes an instrument, alienated from its own premises.

Radio addresses itself to an infinitely expandable public, taking no account of the circumstances under which each individual is listening, but unites them all by playing the same thing to them. Radio is, in the most literal sense, a mass medium, and at the same time, one of the most illusory. Radio suggests closeness and participation. Just as with the telephone, radio makes direct communication possible between people and places existing far apart from each other. It is no accident that the ritual of communication is often expressed in the combination of telephone and direct radio broadcast: now you can say something live on the air, take part. But there is still a clear hierarchy; the presenter’s sonorous tone of voice and power over the medium contrasts violently with the crackling, dry-sounding interlocutor who, far away, is thrilled by her or his participation.

In practice both the closeness and the participation suggested by radio are, strictly speaking, illusions. The impossibility of communication, of contact via the media, is illustrated by Herwig Kemperer on the tape In Hörweite. The words, ‘I am within sound ...’, are followed by a long silence. With dramatic scrupulousness Kemperer’s tape points to the tragedy of sound media: no matter how perfectly

the suggestion of acoustic presence and proximity can be simulated, it remains a model, not a reality. ‘I am within hearing range,’ but invisible and absent. Thus, the absurdity of a medium that promises closer relations and communication while at the same time exposes how far we, as lonely listeners, are removed from one another.

Radio can function as a comforting presence, be it in a rather adverse way, as in a piece by the Yugoslav artist Vladan Radovanović. He is describing a room and his movements in it in the minutest detail, using a fixed microphone. Coming closer and walking away again, speaking softly, then louder, he transforms the loudspeaker into a window through which we clearly see his room. It is comforting when we hear this piece broadcast to imagine ourselves together with a thousand other listeners in their own rooms, peeping through the same window into Vladan’s room: mute listeners, yet together. However it is discomforting that the suggestion of real space can as easily be a purely technical fake, as Radovanović shows in the same tape when he is again ‘walking away’ from us, this time merely by slowly turning down the controls until he is no longer understandable, hardly audible and definitively out of reach.

One of the few composers who tries to fulfil the model of communication between independent and far-removed sources as implied by radio, is Alvin Curran. On January 1st, 1985 he carried out a wide-ranging project, bringing together in a live broadcast, music and environmental sounds from various locations in Italy, West Germany and Holland. Independent, uncoordinated contributions — without any question of conscious collaboration between the locations — formed a sea of sound that flooded much of Western Europe. The only cooperation consisted in the intention of all the contributors, whether as individuals or as groups, to make something beautiful, on the basis of a score by Curran. As the title, A Piece for Peace, indicates, this attitude implied for the composer a political ideal: the ideal of people of good will. However, the cynic could point out that, after all, the artwork was guided by a supreme being: the artist-technician directing everything from behind the mixing board.

The relationship that artists have with the mass media is an ambivalent one. The temptation of direct communication with a very wide and very dispersed public is great, but at the same time the medium throws up a barrier: the communication is not as direct as most artists would wish. Radio, which imposes its codes on the
listener as well as the producer, informs both how we listen and what we are listening to.

Walter Benjamin's concept of 'Rezeption in der Zerstreuung' originally conceived for film, is as valid for radio and records. According to Benjamin the mass reception of art is accompanied by a steady decline in the attention given to the individual work of art: music has become environmental sound, the radio produces ambience, the quality of which can be measured by the ease with which it goes in one ear and out the other. Continuous and omnipresent, radio generates habituation and demands no more than an absent-minded attention. With radio it's often less a matter of what there is to hear than that there is something to hear. The radio is on. The question is whether artists are satisfied with this and, imitating Brian Eno, will make 'ambient music' ridiculing the dispersal of attention.

The problem of a mass medium like radio is that it is not just a tool but an institution that creates its own reality, even when referring to reality at large. Within this context, the medium can absorb almost anything without being affected by it. Radio, like television, is illusory; if reality can be simulated through the medium, then any sound ejected by it will be listened to as being simulation. Because of this illusory character of what the listener hears, radio reduces the most disparate sources and contexts to the one feature they have in common: sound. After all, sounds arranged according to musical, documentary, journalistic, literary or artistic principles remain sound and are transformed into radio. Or is the transformation of the daily radio-background into a work of art strong enough to penetrate the codes of listening? The alienation is two-sided. Only when the codes and categories of the medium are blurred and mixed up will the listener become aware of the simulatory character of the medium. Who is accustomed when hearing radio static to experience it in the same way as a murmuring stream, provided the sound is noticed in the first place? And who would put these sounds on the same level as Bruckner's Ninth? Yet, for the one who paints with it, all this audible material is of equal merit. In the context of the sound work the original context of the treated sounds will only play a role as a reminder, as a reference to a reality somewhere else. What we hear then is not radio, but a story that the artist is telling us.

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