Listening to the archive.

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Archive/jb/urban_sound/archive/…

If you make and collect audio recordings of cities, what are you doing? Should you call it music, acoustic ecology, sound hunting, sociology, sound art, phonography, or that profession proposed by Henri Lefebvre – rhythmanalysis which seems somehow to combine all of these things? Let's dip into my archive and listen…

…/CAS031/cervera_walk1.aif
This sound is from a cassette from 1991. Footsteps (my own) echo along a passage. Carreró de les Bruixes in Cervera, Catalonia. The Witches' street. A sleepy afternoon. There are no witches to be heard on the tape, but occasionally one hears a muffled voice from inside a house (the passage snaked along the hillside among and sometimes underneath the houses), a ventilator, the sound of cooking (bringing back a memory of smells), or a television. The echoey parts of the tape were recorded in dark, cool spaces under the houses. When the passage opened out, sometimes introducing the sounds of birds or insects, the sun beating down was almost unbearable. I was walking to meet my girlfriend in a café on a square near the railway station.

Listening to sounds that I have recorded myself always brings back memories. Not only can I usually remember where and when the recording was made, but I also remember many trivial or personal details. For anybody else many of those memories have no logical connection with the sound itself. My archive contains source recordings, worked recordings, edits, mixes and finished "masters". At the same time it's a diary, incredibly personal, albeit in an obscure, coded way which requires my memory to unlock it. When I work with these sounds, the memories are unleashed – sometimes I change or edit a sound in order to exorcise a haunted, unwanted recollection, sometimes the memories become a secret structuring device.

…/DAT095/munster_bells_close.aif
The pealing of church bells mixes with voices speaking German, footsteps and a splashing fountain.

What a stranger can hear in a sound recording are more or less recognisable sounds and the space in which they resound. These can give clues to the country or city, the time of day or year, the weather, etc. If the sound was recorded on a wax phonograph, wire recorder, optical film strip, cassette, or mobile phone, which all sound different, you could even place the sound in a particular decade.

…/DAT328/madrid_fountain_pump.aif
The sound of a fountain with voices and birds in the middle distance. The microphone is resting on a wall, accidentally picking up a mechanical vibration (the pump for the fountain?) which creates a musical drone underneath the other sounds.

There are as many approaches to using microphones as there are recordists:
You could ask yourself where the sounds are that you wish to record?
Are they to be found at the source of the sound, are they in your ears, or somewhere in the space in between?

Recording with microphones in your ears seems to be closest to your own perception of sound. (1) But it's not only the sound that you will capture, but also the movements of your head and body - a breath, a sniff, a footstep. When you listen back to the recording on headphones, it's as if you are really there, but someone else is there too - the ghost of the body of the recordist is also present on the tape.

Other microphone techniques shift focus and perspective to different degrees. (2) Small microphones can go where your ears can't – inside a bottle on a beach perhaps. Then the resonance of the vessel can be a stronger element in the recording than the surrounding noises. Attach a contact microphone to a

window and it turns into a huge microphone. Are you then listening to a sheet of glass, or are you hearing the world as if you were a sheet of glass?

…/DAT379/funicular_descent.aif
Many voices, close to the listener. Behind these, heavy traffic. Footsteps on stone steps lead us away from the traffic into a resonant space. Beeping and clunking machines check the flow of the crowd. The soft hum of escalators and other machines fills the space as we descend quietly to the platforms.

I might go to a city with the plan to record an event: a market, demonstration or ceremony.
Or a place: plaza, atrium, park, alleyway.
Or a thing: a flag in the wind, boat horns in the harbour.
But often I will just walk. An aural derive – following your ears - is a great way to explore a place but sometimes I will follow someone in order to be taken somewhere unexpected. The recording becomes a trace, a line drawn through the city.

I'm especially fond of recording walks which cross acoustic thresholds: moving from a busy street into an echoing passage or sleepy courtyard, or from an expensive shopping street into a poor area with kids playing street football. The recordings reveal just how much our hearing can tell us about the urban fabric.

…/2009/bcn01/macba_plein_soundcheck.wav
Skaters on a plaza create echoes from the buildings when their boards hit the ground. Someone is testing a PA system with a microphone.

One can use technology to reveal the acoustic signature of a space. (3) Space itself is then heard, distilled. But in everyday life the spaces of the city are sounded by the activities that take place in them. The interaction between productive or playful activity and acoustic space creates a social sonic space. Children playing or skateboarders use sound to signal their activity, laying claim to the space. If you listen to recordings of public spaces, can you hear if they are socially successful spaces or not? Conversely, could one base a plan for a new public space on an acoustic design?

…/DAT290/bcn_roof_telinga.aif
We hear noises from the surrounding streets and houses (voices, cooking, air-conditioning, a siren, bells). I move the microphone between different resonant chambers – from buckets and a tin bath on the roof, through the kitchen and bathroom to an echoing airshaft in the centre of the building.

There is much debate in the world of phonography on how much one is "allowed" to change sound once that it's been recorded. And just as with photography there is a spectrum of different approaches ranging from the "sonic snapshot" to the framed or even staged recording.

For me a recording is a trace made by a listener. A listener engaging with the soundscape and making choices by choosing when to record, with which microphone, from which distance, or by moving. Just being present in an environment changes the way that it will sound.

No matter how purist your approach is to making a recording, when it's played through loudspeakers into a room the equipment and the acoustics of the space change the sound into something else. The result is never the same as the original soundfield and not even the same as the signals recorded onto the tape.

…/the_well/work/istik_b_res-12_LPF.wav
A very resonant droning sound in which voice-like details can be detected, sometimes a phrase of music.

Electronic manipulation of sound is for me primarily an extension of the recording process. It's like zooming into the sound to hear it more clearly. Using filters, you can scan through the frequency range of a recording for interesting details which can then be separated from the "background noise". Transposition (varispeed) "plays" the sound at different speeds, moving unnoticed frequency areas into the audible range.

This process is a special form of listening, re-interpreting the sound to intensify what it is that I find interesting.

This reinterpretation can start to suggest compositional strategies. But every process creates more distance between the listener and the original recorded event, eventually replacing it with a new perception altogether.

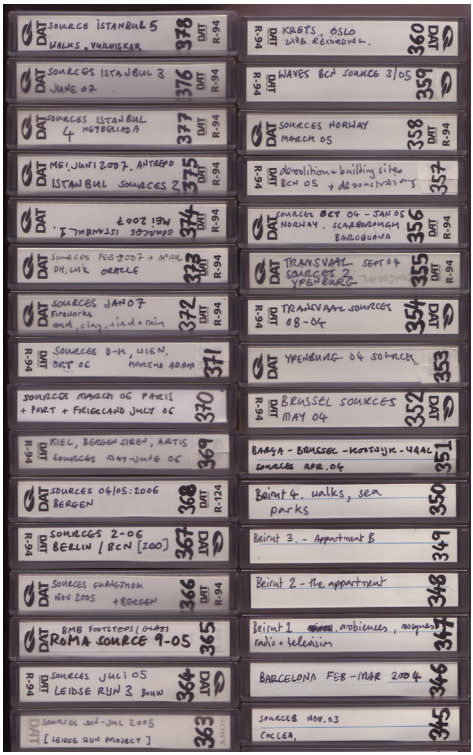
Editing sound is, of course, also a form of manipulation - creating musical, or narrative form. In extreme cases, the minute splicing of sounds can create new ones. (4) Generally though, I like to keep sound in large chunks. Sounds for me are not objects, samples that I have hunted and captured but excerpts of life which reveal spaces, atmospheres, movements and rhythms. Even when strongly processed the rhythms and movements are still present in the resulting sound.

…/sundial/Den_Haag_roof/dh_21.08.2005.15.32.00.wav
Birds chattering. Distant traffic. A dog barks, a child shouts, then another. A distant aeroplane.

On its own this sound doesn't tell anyone very much, it only makes sense in context. This is a fragment from a project called Sundial. I make acoustic portraits of different cities by making timed recordings at a single location over the course of a day. Later I edit these sounds chronologically into a piece lasting just a few minutes. The acoustic signatures of the cities and their daily rhythms can thus be (subjectively) compared. At first I thought that after I had made a few of these pieces it would become boring, and that I would stop. But I realised that the repetition of this process, despite or perhaps because of the boring bits, was teaching me to listen to the city in a different way. For instance, trying to find the moment, usually between 3 and 5 in the morning, when there is something in the city that I can call "silence" – a different silence for every city in the world.

"The Rhythmanalyst… will listen to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning, and to murmurs, full of meaning – and finally he will listen to silences." (5)

Justin Bennett 2011



Notes

(1) "Binaural" recording uses omni-directional microphones placed in or near the ears of the recordist. This technique gives a very realistic three-dimensional effect when heard through headphones and it is often used when creating "soundwalk" pieces.

(2) For instance, cardioid microphones pick up sound from the front and not behind, MS stereo microphones allow the adjustment of the stereo width, shotgun or parabolic microphones bring a sound perceptually closer, while ambisonic microphones attempt to capture the whole field of sound in three-dimensions.

(3) By recording a pistol-shot or a sweeping sine wave in a space, one then can capture, analyse and use its acoustic signature or "impulse response"

(4) Techniques such as brassage or granulation automatically chop sounds into thousands of "grains" which can be then stretched or re-ordered What is the smallest piece of recorded sound one can hear, and still hear what it was?

(5) Henri Lefebvre "The Rhythmanalyst: A Previsionary Portrait, p19" 1992 (in Rhythmanalysis, Space, time and everyday life. Continuum 2004.)