
Shared Listening Journey: The Sounds of Displacement (France: August 4-6, 1997)

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Following the International Congress of Acoustic Ecology at the Abbaye de Royaumont in Paris, a group of twelve congress participants embarked on a three day shared listening journey through France. The theme of the journey was "the sounds of displacement," so appropriately, the group was in constant sonic motion through Lyon, Grenoble, Clelles (Mont Aiguille region), and Nice.

Various types of rail transport were used between each location. This provided a thematic set of variations ranging from the soft hum of the TGV train (Paris-Lyon) to the rattly and metallic shaking of the narrow-gauge train (Clelles to Nice). What follows is a commentary on the experience of the trip in general, along with descriptions of a few soundscape highlights.

Charles de Gaulle SNCF Station - Monday August 4; circa 9:30 AM.

To start the journey, the group convened at a drop off point which overlooked the Charles de Gaulle SNCF Station. While waiting I looked down on the train platform through a succession of white steel arched beams. A glass roof covered the white beams. This added to the diffused and hazy acoustic character of the vast, arena-like, open air train station. Within this cloud of acoustic haziness came a strange musical interaction between the airplanes, trains, cars, and buses, as they all arrived and departed within earshot of our rendezvous point.

One incident began with a prolonged cadence from a piece of Celtic-sounding accordion music playing over the PA system. After drifting into a thick cocoon of overlapping reverberations, the decay of the music drifted seamlessly into the gradually ascending glissando of a departing TGV train. As a bus pulled in and eventually obliterated the train's presence, the bus pushed the glissando downward before coming to a full stop. All of these arrivals and departures found a strange cohesive unity under the station's heavy blanket of reverberation.

Later on, an airplane had pulled up just beyond the station. As soon as the plane turned ninety degrees away from me, the sound of its propellers or engine diminished considerably in loudness from being an enormous grimace of white noise down to a soft background murmur. This was certainly a very rare occasion, because it is not often you encounter a sound with so much directionality in an environment with such murky acoustics.

Descent from Fourvière in Lyon. Monday August 4; circa 11:00 PM.

Around eleven o'clock that same evening, we took a long winding staircase down the hillside to an old section of Lyon. Reflections were very crisp along the stone staircase. The automobile roar from the city below was quiet enough to follow the music of these reflections with every step downward. I relished the crispness and clarity and activated

the space with tongue clicks and finger snaps.

The climax of the journey occurred near the bottom of the hill. A narrower space between the parallel stone walls produced very pronounced eigentones. I responded with a series of shouts and aahs to draw out the colour of the space. I noticed that by moving a couple of steps in any direction, the eigentones disappeared altogether. It was as if the area in which the eigentones occurred was a sort of invisible cone into which one could enter and indulge oneself acoustically. After leaving this phantom playground, our group segued slowly into the night time ambience of Lyon. Whereupon, the journey through narrow cobbled streets back to the hotel, drew to a gradual finish.

Difficulties in Group Listening

Complaints were raised that the sounds of the group were overtaking the listening journey. For instance, when travelling as a group in the train, there was always the temptation for individuals to talk with one another. This caused frustration for the recordists who kept picking up the same voices over and over. This also kept listeners from fully engaging in the soundscapes they inhabited. As Pierre MariÉtan pointed out, "we are hearing the sounds of each other far too often." It became apparent to us that much more self-discipline was required from each listener in a group situation than what was perhaps necessary in a personal context.

Listening Privately in Mont Aiguille region. Tuesday August 5.

The day in the mountains was a nice break from the previous experiences of the listening journey. At last I could listen on my own. I took a walk in the afternoon along a winding road in the quiet rural mountainside. Events in this soundscape passed by gently in the distance. Each event approached one respectfully in single file. By comparison, the previous soundscapes all clamoured and moaned with a multiplicity of events spilling out onto one from every possible direction.

A few of us when up the mountain for a short soundwalk in the evening. Ray Gallon made an interesting comment about the crickets we heard in the field (or were they cicadas?). He said, "the fact that there is continuity in the sound is because there are lots of individuals out of phase with each other." What Ray called continuity I perceived as being a mass of unified vocal activity. Earlier that same evening during dinner I experienced a different texture of overlapping voices. This one however could not be qualified in the same way.

I was among the first ones to arrive at dinner. Our tables were in a sectioned off area; the kind normally reserved for large groups. As everyone arrived one after the other, a long gradual crescendo in volume and density climbed upward for about 30 minutes. I didn't say very much that evening and concentrated more on the activity around me. I followed just one conversation at first. Then some moments later my attention was split between two conversations. Later still, I found myself listening to the two conversations in closest proximity, while sliding over occasionally to those that drifted in from other parts of the table. Finally, I was straining to take in just one conversation right in front of me, while fighting to tune out tempting snatches of hearsay, speculation, and laughter from elsewhere.

It was never possible to step outside of the group and hear all the voices as one unified mass. I was enveloped inside the texture and lived and breathed with each player of the orchestra. Which meant that, unlike the sound of the crickets, I could distinguish unique

characteristics of each individual voice and distribute various ones into different groupings. Only when I could walk away into an adjoining room could I ever start grouping the overlapping conversations into a unified mass of sound. But even then other factors would prevent me from experiencing them in this way. I would still distinguish differences in the timbre and register of each voice, not to mention any differences in contents of speech, tone of voice, gender, age, loudness, and so forth. Do the crickets actually experience something similar? Are the voices of their own group full of individual characters competing for attention, while the collective groupings of other animal species, such as humans, form a thick ball of uniform vocal activity?

Seizing the Moment

The listening journey on the whole was a very difficult challenge, because the notion of displacement and constant movement restrained the listening experience considerably. Often during soundwalks there was never time to just stop and listen. Many times we rushed to catch a train or make an appointment. This was frustrating, because listening to me had always meant slowing down and opening up to the experiences around you.

A month after the listening journey I finally realized that the trip was actually orchestrated in the most realistic way possible. It became apparent to me that nine out of ten times the most interesting sounds in my soundscape were heard while I was in the midst of performing one task or another. Often these tasks revolved primarily around the use of vision, which I had always believed to hinder the extent which I could listen to the soundscape. Thus, the challenge of the journey was to keep the ear engaged in any type of everyday task, despite how straightforward or perplexing it might seem.

But to meet this challenge the group had to put aside our preconceptions of what conditions were ideal for listening. Why, for example, ignore the soundscape on account of being stressed or preoccupied, when none of us probably never listened to the soundscape completely free of internalized social pressures? As an alternative, why could one not skip along the road briskly, perhaps late for work, while still being open and aware enough to catch the darting doppler of a roaring fire engine. Likewise, as one walked through a tight narrow corridor between buildings, why could one not take a second to snap one's fingers and hear the flicker of echoes bouncing this way and that? Moments of discovery invariably await one on the most unsuspecting occasions. It was just a matter of "seizing the moment whenever it came," which was how Pierre MariÈtan phrased it. I have now realized that the key to seizing the moment existed all along inside a kernel of alert listening sensitivity. Every listener could access this kernel within him or herself; despite whatever distraction existed on the outside or on the inside. Our biggest limitation, in the end, was in letting the distractions stand between the soundscape and our listening.

The journey provided me with a glowing illustration of how everyday social pressures build up in one, and occupy the junction that connects the ears with the imagination. The trip made it apparent that this junction should be kept free of any unnecessary clutter. It also reminded me of the discoveries which were possible only when the imagination was engaged in the activities of the present moment (rather than being preoccupied by the reminiscences of the past). It so happened that upon my return to Birmingham, the local soundscape rippled with a new fascination. A simple activity, such as water-sprinklers on the rugby field, could be dissected from many new angles as so much more detail became apparent. Perhaps this detail was evident because I had been away for a week. But then again, maybe it came to me because I had been reminded that I was virtually running from the sounds around me. Alas, I could listen around the issue of performing some

menial task, which in this case was walking to the studio on campus.

The underlying moral of the journey was that even when running to catch a train, one was never free, by extension, to run from the soundscape. The moment was always there latent with new possibilities. After all, the soundscape never fell silent when one was dashing for the train. Only the ears had fallen silent at that moment to create what was ultimately an illusion of silence. Thus, at whatever speed one had been travelling, moments lingered at the edge of attention. From there they awaited discovery and collection for future reflection and enhanced understanding.

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