
Above and Below Acoustic Ecology

Author: Albert Mayr

Introduction

With the following text I do not at all want to suggest that the WFAE reconsider its name. 'Acoustic ecology' is certainly a workable programmatic motto and a sufficiently catchy slogan for the promotion of our goals. Nevertheless I think that now that the organizational and functional set-up is well defined we can afford:

- to define more clearly, to ourselves in the first place, what the term means and what it definitely should not mean.
- to discuss how comfortable we feel with it.

I, for one, have long felt a certain uneasiness with it, or at least with the way we have been using it so far; an uneasiness that has not disappeared after the meetings in Royaumont and Stockholm. I will try to formulate its main aspects in a subjective, anecdotal way without any claims to scientific validity.

Excerpts from a listening (and not) diary

June 1998. I am walking up a mountain. It's a nice, sunny day. Some birds, their visual presence strangely out of sync with their acoustic presence, irregular wafts of wind bringing fragments of the traffic noise in the valley up to where I am. Suddenly the weather gets worse. I want to make it to the top, but don't want to get caught in a storm. So I walk faster and faster, my heartbeat accelerates, I feel the blood hammering in my ears, now I can also hear it. Aha, I think, here I have a new entry for my listening diary. The hammering becomes quite loud, all other sounds get amplitude-modulated by it.

To my surprise, the big dark clouds in the sky move away as quickly as they had arrived. I relax. The hammering in the ears is still there, it's not audible anymore but still modulates the external sounds. I reach the top and rest. On the way back, with my auditory perception back to normal, I try to find an appropriate angle for the listening diary. I have gone through a lot of 'earmindedness' (part of it not voluntary, part of it not auditory), but is this the right vantage point? From when on do I register my heartbeat, for example, from the moment I can feel it distinctly, from the moment it starts affecting my perception of the sounds around me, or from the moment it becomes audible by itself? Could there not be a way of integrating the acoustic phenomena into the wider context of the psychophysiological experience?

Billy et al.

WFAE is committed to respect and protect the sonic manifestations of all species. There is, of course, nothing to be said against this. But how do we go about those low-frequency oscillations that are sonic to other species but not to us, simply because we can't hear them? Does our commitment extend to them too? This may look like a minor issue, but I think it has methodological implications that are not secondary.

Billy is my dog. From our angle he behaves rather ecologically, that is, he barks rarely. When the siren of a police-car or an ambulance passes nearby he howls against it, out of

discomfort, I imagine, although sometimes he gives also the impression of trying to join in an ancestral ritual. I will never know, probably, nor will I know whether other forms of his behaviour that may appear strange to me are due to acoustic signals or noises that he can hear and I cannot.

The frequency and amplitude ranges within which we perceive oscillations as sounds are, as we know, different from those of other species. Thus it may seem rather anthropocentric to say: Let's take care of the low-frequency phenomena we can hear, what's outside our perception range may attract our attention occasionally, but is not of real concern to us.

Acoustic Ecology and Time Geography

Most disturbing and ugly sounds originate from some human activity. Now, certainly such sounds need to be fought against whatever their origin may be. At the same time I think there are certain activities that by themselves are closer to our field of interest and thus may deserve some special attention. Let's take traffic, for instance. Here the AE approach follows two main lines: Noise abatement (involving research and activism) and acoustic design (involving research and lobbying for implementation of better solutions). Furthermore we are also in favour of measures aiming at reducing individual motor traffic, such as a greater availability of low-cost public transport and the promotion of the use of bicycles in urban areas.

I believe we should go a step further and also ask a few questions that, at first sight, have little to do with AE, such as: Why do people today move around so much? (Let's ignore the transport of goods for the moment.) Which characteristic patterns can one detect in the mobility of a given population? Do these patterns tell us anything relevant?

Now somebody may argue that, if we go as far as asking such questions, by the same token we ought also to investigate, say, the economic and other processes of industrial plants. I don't agree, because human travels, be they on foot from one's home to the grocery next door, be they in a jet around the world, are mechanical oscillations, out of our hearing range certainly, but just a few powers of ten below the oscillations we are dealing with normally and thus rather akin to sounds.

A suggestion

What I am trying to hint at through these sketchy examples is this: Perhaps we could use the term AE not only in its current meaning, i.e. referred to audible oscillations, but also in a broader, more abstract meaning, in the sense of an acoustically inspired approach to all low-frequency phenomena.

This would link us to the musical-ecological approach (so to speak) of the Pythagorean tradition, with its extended concept of music that comprises everything periodic in the low-frequency field, audible or not, and much more.

Using AE in a figurative sense would also open up some so far neglected interdisciplinary links. In fact, if we leave aside the fields that deal with audio phenomena from different angles (acoustics, psycho-acoustics, etc.) it appears that our interdisciplinary dialogue has been primarily with disciplines concerned with static configurations (architecture, urban planning). This has led, in part, to a notion of environmental sound as being another element in the "furniture" of substantially static spaces. Thus it seems appropriate to bring AE back in contact with the disciplines that look (and listen) to the environment (natural and man-made) from a dynamic angle and think of it as a set of processes and flows.

