

Our Sonic Territories

Barkin Engin

While wandering through the calm, almost imaginary streets of Ghent on a recent November night, suddenly familiar yet unexpectedly organized sounds caught our attention. An automated carillon located inside the belfry of Ghent was performing an eclectic set of music including Bach-like fugues and contemporary popular music classics. Besides concentrating on the unique intonation of the instrument and enjoying the impact of the beautiful reflections bouncing from the physical objects nearby, one could not avoid meditating on several questions regarding the soundscapes of the cities, their evolution over the years and inevitably their influences on individuals. Would my approach to the idea of sound / musical objects be different (borrowing from Pierre Schaeffer's terminology seems appropriate) if I grew up in a different city like Ghent, where a carillon performance is the loudest sound audible on a Friday night? Or would my aural perception and sound palette gradually change during the rest of my life if I move out from Istanbul, where I am based all my life and relocate to a relatively quieter city?

It is impossible to come up with absolute answers. The cultural and socio-economical factors complicate things even further. Therefore humble assumptions would be easily discarded. Nevertheless this state of obscurity could function as an opportunity to explore new depths in subjective aural matters. A frequently directed question to musicians and sound artists is the motivation of their employment of certain unusual types of sounds in their work instead of using traditionally accepted, easily identifiable, and source wise recognisable sounds. Usually these unfamiliar sounds are simply labelled as "noise", despite all the disadvantages associated with the term, mostly due to lack of critical and depictive precision. Personally, this has been always a challenging situation for me to answer scientifically enough. Trying to deconstruct an aesthetical instinct does not often receive appreciation or is often not perceived sufficiently. The language itself occasionally becomes a barrier with its own limitations to define aural experiences and impressions. Surprisingly now it seems that all of a sudden a brand new perspective to

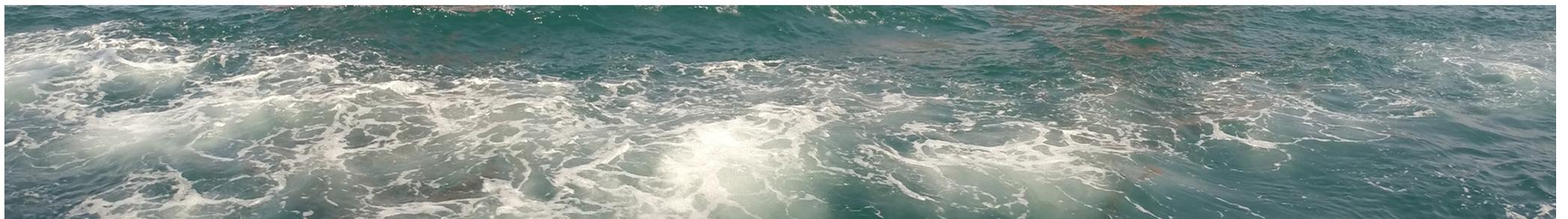
attempt to develop an analytical listening approach towards complex sound objects; unquestionably out of pure curiosity and excitement. Years later, I wonder if the motivation of my personal preference to use these specific types of sounds dominantly might have a direct relationship with my sonic encounters in my daily life starting from infancy.

It is certainly highly typical for a city with a high population growth rate such as Istanbul (officially 15 million people are living there at the moment) to contain a wide range of cultural elements with each of their own sonic contributions to the overall soundscape; of course, along with an unpreventable noise pollution thread supported by the industrial and technological development. Cultural variety has clearly significance on music appreciation and unquestionably broadens up individual compositional perspectives. Istanbul is a special case in this sense. In terms of music, many different genres are clashing with each other on the streets of Istanbul, either live or recorded, creating occasionally a giant cluster. It is possible to state that musically Istanbul represents all of the cultural elements in relatively close proximity; Anatolia, Europe and Middle East. In the course of time, one can absorb all of the different melodic, rhythmical, form-related and also temperament-wise musical varieties just by being a passive listener. Thus it is quite natural to develop an eclectic taste as a dedicated music listener. However, what is more appealing for me now is to question the influence of what Murray Schafer labelled as "keynote sounds" and "soundmarks" of specific geographical areas in his classic book "The Soundscape". A sonic encounter - a carillon performance in this case - triggered all these questions and related memories in a semi-Proustian way.

My sound-wise recollections from my childhood in Istanbul are not quite diverse and not necessarily harmonious in the traditional sense. Sounds of nature or even temporary silence have always a secondary role in my daily aural surroundings. During the daytime, constant traffic noise with a variable density was the foundational part in the sonic arrangement. I remember lis-

of day, the broad band noise of the sea has been creating an infinite pad for all of the present layers across the shorelines. In addition to all of the physical sound sources, two artificial yet interesting sounds for a child like me living in 1980's Turkey was the white noise coming from the speakers of the television set, when the first and the only TV channel stops broadcasting at midnight, except for generating a test signal until the next morning. Without having a clue about the appearance of this particular sound type and knowing nothing about its spectral and technical qualities, I often found myself listening to it and discovering a sort of timbral progression embellished with hidden melodic lines. Other universal contributions to my sound world were the static of the radio and the eight bit synthesis sounds coming from the primitive gaming devices and toys. These fundamental layers were the main ingredients for the soundtrack of my childhood. I do not think that it was essentially different than one can experience in any western metropolis, besides the cultural and religious factors of course. The common ground was the gradually increasing loudness over the years, perfectly in synch with the political changes and it continues to be so today. Meanwhile, I must have developed a curiosity for sound objects with unpredictable qualities and textures just by witnessing them, instead of reacting oppositely to the constant lack of silence. The essential question stays unanswered though; would we become different human beings in different cities or in different sonic environments at least? I think I would like to trace the answers from now on.

Final question: Did the soundscape of Istanbul change approximately after 30 years? Content wise definitely it did; life on earth sounds completely distinctive in 2015 mostly due to technological evolution, but daily auditory experience in Istanbul remained the same more or less, but louder as Murray Schafer could have easily foreseen. Some of the cultural elements gradually disappeared, making east and west comparisons regarding the idea of soundscape even more difficult. Lately Istanbul's sound palette is expanded by the sounds of protests against the government; insidious shrills of the tear gas



this old debate has appeared for me: I have been living in a strictly noisy city for a long time! Is my personal inclination to sound and music a result of aural Stockholm syndrome or is it a somehow forced discovery that noise can function as a musical object? It is hard to tell, but one definite thing is that my personal approach has nothing to do with the classic historical Futuristic tendencies in terms of sanctifying industrialisation and technology. Rather it is a spontaneous one.

It has been exactly twenty years since I had the first chance to experiment with non musical sounds and sound manipulation, using my extremely humble cassette tape recorder, which was capable of overdubbing sounds. Without having a conceptual or theoretical foundation, I found myself juxtaposing highly abstract or abstracted layers of sound objects. These naive experiments were often producing dense, harsh textures accompanied by the cumulative hiss of the tape. Looking back, I prefer to label this period not necessarily as a pursuit for an avant-garde artistic statement but an empirical

tening to the Doppler shift counterpoints coming from the main road without the need to observe its visual flow. This dense layer was combined with the calls for prayer five times a day, which was always distorted due to the low-fidelity speakers of the mosques. The timing differences between muezzins resulted with canons or mostly dissonant juxtapositions in random order. The leading parts were mostly performed by the street sellers and children playing around. The street sellers were showing off their impressive self-taught ability to employ singer's formant in order to be heard among the crowds and attract even the people inside their apartments. The only available quiet place around my neighbourhood was the enormous garden of the notorious psychiatric hospital, unless the silence is interrupted by the patients. I must say that it was a bit scary scenery for a child. When the night came, the street dogs and occasionally street cats were assuming the lead parts for establishing the aural domain, as they still continue to do the same for many locations, whether you are on a central or non-central location. Regardless of the time

capsules, the humiliating splashes of the water cannons; in short sounds of resistance. As I'm writing these sentences, Istanbul is captured by the greedy roaring of the construction mania as a classic result of the neoliberal agenda in order to trade cultural and natural elements with short term personal financial interests. Now we are listening to noisy yet sad farewell composition, longing for the loss of the long history of civilisation and cultures present on these lands. I hope new sounds will be heard again soon.