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Recording, Representation & Responsibility: questions of authorship and agency when field recording for electroacoustic composition

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Abstract

This presentation examines both the act of field recording and the practice of composing with this captured sound. In doing so, the aim is to identify questions and considerations for further discussion, focussing on:

- a. the compositional decision-making implicit in the act of field recording;
- b. the socio-cultural and political implications of composing with field recordings;
- c. the perceived authorship and ownership over the recordings themselves, and any resulting composition;
- d. the responsibility of representation of the self and other(s) in composition.

The results of this on-going practice-based research perhaps signify a new way forward for thinking about compositions derived from field recordings. The recordist-composer should recognise the active agency they have in the field, the responsibility of representation in composition, and equally that the 'finished' work is considered unfinished without the agency of a listener. All roles carry an equal level of responsibility and authorship.

Preamble

I am a composer, sound artist and field recordist currently completing a PhD in composition – the research for which relates to these areas. I have worked on a number of artistic projects that relate to the topic of this presentation. By way of introduction, a few examples of recent work include:

Concert works: e.g. *Manifest* (2013), an 'acousmatic documentary' based on the sounds of protest recorded in Barcelona in 2011/12

Reflexive pieces: e.g. *Muscle Memory* (2014), based around a 'field recording' of two people listening to jazz records, which "foregrounds questions of musical meaning, of modes of listening, and the role of technologies in mediating this listening" (Waters 1).

Participative & socially-engaged projects: e.g. *Som da Maré* (2014), *Walls On Walls* (2015) – two distributed approaches to understanding more about day to day life through sounds: one in a large favela in Rio, the other across a number of social housing estates in the north London borough of Camden.

Narrated Field Recordings: e.g. *Thoughts In the Field* (2015) – a collaborative project with Isobel Anderson, documenting sounds through field recording and simultaneous

spoken word, highlighting the presence of the recordist ‘behind’ the microphone as an active bodily agent within the landscape.

This is all practice-based research and as such, questions are both developed and addressed through artistic action, by *doing*. In this presentation I’d like to outline a framework of my understanding so far of the issues relating to the title here. I draw on personal practical experience, the experiences of other practitioners, and critical engagement from theorists. The intention is to open up the topic for continued work and discussion.

This talk in particular centres on the first of my examples – taking recognisable sounds of people and place, for use in electroacoustic concert pieces. I will divide the issue into two: firstly looking at field recording as a self-contained practice, before considering representation and the application of field recording in composition. This then leads us finally to questions of ethics, or responsibility.

Recording

Practitioners in the art of field recording are currently experiencing a growing sense of self-awareness. It is similar to the crisis of conscience that rumbled through anthropology in the 1970s and 80s, which overhauled the practice of ethnographic fieldwork in the process. Recent sonic arts discourse has engaged with the artistic practice of field recording, calling to better acknowledge the presence of the recordist as an active agent in the field (Voeglin, 2014; Lane and Carlyle, 2013; Demers, 2009). Lane and Carlyle pose the following question:

One of the ways in which the field can be defined relates to the reflexivity that is attributed to it: to the definition of the field’s ability to accommodate the recordist. Is the recordist an audible presence? Are they a silent participant who nonetheless provides some experiential authenticity or at least takes responsibility for pressing ‘record’ and then ‘stop’? Or is the recordist understood to be of relative insignificance compared to the dynamic properties of the scene itself? (Lane and Carlyle, 2013: 10).

Voeglin, in a more polemic magazine article, describes early field recording efforts as empirical data-gathering, a scientific phonography. To communicate well, she argues that these relied not only on the recordings but on labels and descriptions – also conventions taken from the archival and pedagogical objectives – to make up for what was lacking in sound. She states that this ‘age of innocence’ is now hard to shift in the realm of current phonography, partly due to recordists’ trust in their own multisensory memory of the field. She writes:

Some field recording is thus incredibly boring and irrelevant for all but the recordist: the exotica of the source replacing the idiosyncrasy of the material recorded, the pleasures and complexities of which are hidden and inaccessible to an audience standing by and listening in ... Exciting field recording does not record the field but produces a plurality of fields. It neither abandons the reality of the recorded nor does it take it for granted, but works with it, responds to it, understands it as one imprint in the landscape made by the body of the recordist and tentatively retraced by the listener. This listener in turn generates a new imprint between the heard and the recorded, listening to the authenticity of a particular rendition rather than its source, and embracing interpretation as part of the actuality of the real. (Voeglin, 2014: 16)

If we go back to anthropology for a moment, this very much echoes Tim Ingold’s thoughts on how isolating sound from a ‘_scape’ is similar to removing light from a landscape. He perceives difficulties in dividing mind and matter – a division reproduced in focussing on the

materiality of sound. Ingold writes: “sound, in my view, is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of experience – that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves.” (Ingold, 2007: 11)

In my view, we should not abandon the concept of soundscape altogether (as Ingold goes on to suggest), but the point at which the views of Voeglin and Ingold connect, and take issue with sound, is in the understanding and communication of multi-sensory experience, through sound.

What then, if, rather than focussing only on the materiality of sound, we aim to maintain “a creative and analytical relationship to both materiality and sociality of sound” (Feld and Brenneis, 2004: 462). This in turn brings about a question of why one would choose to represent an immersive, multi-sensory experience in sound only, and how to re-tell that experience if only the recordist was there on her or his own. And so we arrive back at Voeglin’s difficulty of the exotic being replaced by the idiosyncratic – the reproduction of one persons multi-sensory experience with a single-sensory sonic version. What is it about sound that has the potential makes field recording so exciting?

Peter Cusack asserts that although sound in isolation has its drawbacks, and language or visual images can communicate basic information in arguably more explicit form than sound, field recordings “transmit a powerful sense of spatiality, atmosphere and timing. [...] They give a compelling impression of what it might actually be like to be there.” (Cusacks, 2013: 26) This is similar to a point Simon Emmerson made in his talk yesterday, saying that (I paraphrase from my notes) ‘some sound experiences moves us into the “nonverbal” or perhaps even “preverbal” place, one that can only be described in sound, and should not be invaded!’

I entirely agree with both Emmerson and Cusack. However, it must be made clear that any recording will give a *personal* impression of what it might have been like when s/he – the recordist – was there. Voeglin describes field recording as a rendition, a translation, a version of a moment interpreted by the listener. The recording is not authored, it is not an original work, but the presence of what we might have called an ‘author’ is felt. The recordist leaves a trace in the landscape they visited, and the resulting recordings are the chance to listen to the authenticity of *their* rendition of the actual, rather than a document of reality.

This understanding carries with it a heightened sense of awareness and responsibility. As happened in ethnographic research in anthropology, recordists are now encouraged to be increasingly reflexive, and to address moral and ethical issues associated with recording and representation. The choices over what sounds one might record, where, when, how and crucially, why, all become much more significant factors.

Representation

How does this more reflexive, sensitive, self-aware approach to field recording apply to composition? What type of compositions are we talking about? To begin with, let us address soundscape composition, or perhaps as Barry Truax suggests to redefine the term, ‘context-based composition’ (Two Thousand +THIRTEEN symposium, Sonorities Festival, Queen’s University Belfast). This is understood to be composition where: field recordings are incorporated into a composition and maintain ‘recognisability’; the composers/listeners

knowledge of the context is drawn on or evoked; and where the understanding of the context and experience of making the recording is drawn on to compose. Truax writes (2008: 106): “the composer’s knowledge of the environment and psychological context of the soundscape material is allowed to influence the shape of the composition at every level, and ultimately the composition is inseparable from some or all of those aspects of reality.”

If we are looking for another way to frame this type of activity, Demers proposes a blurring of the idea of site-specific.

How, then, can these field recordings be considered site-specific sound art? One answer is to interrogate one of the primary criteria of site-specific art, that its materials foreground culture and history. I propose a more inclusive definition, namely that the boundaries that separate the work from the outside world are blurry. (Demers, 2009: 39)

If the aim here in this presentation is to identify questions and considerations for further discussion, these should focus on:

- a. the compositional decision-making implicit in the act of field recording;
- b. the perceived authorship and ownership over the recordings themselves, and any resulting composition;
- c. the socio-cultural and political implications of composing with field recordings;
- d. the responsibility of representation of the self and other(s) in composition.

For composers, the choices of what, where, when, how and why one might record are artistically motivated editorial decisions. The act of recording in the field becomes part of the act of composing. Perhaps those doing it already implicitly understood this. However, are there rigorous attempts to understand the interrelationship between recordist/composer and subject within composition? Should there be?

How does the crisis of representation within the world of field recording apply more broadly to electroacoustic composition, and particularly acousmatic music? If field recordings are decontextualised or masked, and their original context hidden, does this alter or avoid any ethical considerations a composer might face? If Demers’ definition of ‘blurred boundaries’ between the work and the outside world is followed, how blurred can those boundaries become with abstracted or transformed material before any understanding an audience might have from a field recording is obscured, contradicted or concealed?

I have written previously about a ‘socio-sonic’ methodology for electroacoustic composition (2014), one where the generation of abstracted sound materials is guided by an ethnographic sensibility. In channelling the extra-sonic information gained in the field through new, abstract sounds, the new materials may ‘interpenetrate’ with the field recordings (Emmerson, 2007: 14) – described as an “interpenetration and mutual support of real and imaginary – or perhaps that should be outer and inner reality”.

This might begin filling the void of missing information that Voeglin craves from raw field recordings. The following question is one of ethics, in terms of composer intention and politics (with a small p). The *why* you would compose and record with any particular sounds?

As a composer, the question of why one might record something at all can be difficult to answer on ethical grounds, especially if the motive is primarily ‘because it sounds interesting and I want to use it in a compositional art work’. We might begin by considering the recordists’ connection with the sound they are recording. They may be an ‘insider’ in anthropological terms or a sonic “stakeholder” (Blackburn, 2014: 149), which potentially

gives the recordist-composer more freedom to capture and work with the sound in question. If the recordist is an outsider, the difficulties become apparently more challenging. Their connection with the place or people they wish to capture, the reason they are making a recording, and for whose benefit, all comes under greater scrutiny. How will the insiders to that environment be involved in any of the process? How will the composer represent them?

Responsibility

A recent issue of *Organised Sound* (2014, 19-2) was dedicated entirely to a discussion of ethical issues in electroacoustic composition and the potential of cultural appropriation in electroacoustic music. Within the success of bringing that debate forward, in some senses the discourse is a post-mortem. Composers (I speak not least for myself) are perhaps more often attempting to justify their choices *after* recording, and perhaps indeed, after composing.

It might be argued that whilst composers working with ‘outsider’ cultures have to answer difficult questions about their own agency, the ‘insider’ composers appropriating sounds common to them escape the call to be more rigorous in understanding why they are recording particular sounds. Perhaps composers should consider the implications of using any field-recorded sounds, and particularly for the significance it has for themselves. What does the authorial voice say about the self when employing field recordings *either* from close to *or* far from home? Who is really represented in the piece? How might different audiences hear that in different contexts? Andean suggests that

the work of art is entirely transactional – a cultural negotiation, with artist and audience as the primary agents... as a locus of cultural communication, exchange and interaction, ethics are fully implicated in the very heart of the art work. (Andean, 2014: 178)

Responsibility may equally be with the listener as the composer, but more pressing is the need as a composer/recordist *and* listener to realise one's own unshakable cultural entrenchment. Michael Gallagher reminds us that:

if listening is about making rather than receiving meaning, then that process will always be compromised, messy, provisional and unfinished, taking place amidst a motley assemblage of sounding bodies, materials and spaces. It is a matter of negotiating some brief consensus amongst these various elements, building snippets of sense from a clutter of auditory signifiers which, like Lego bricks, can easily be pulled apart again and rearranged. (Gallagher, 2013: 42)

Aspects of the composers’ cultural identity and active agency within the field are certainly an undeniable part of the process of composition. Do these ever come across as part of the finished work? What really constitutes ‘authorship’ over field recordings and the sounds derived from them? Perhaps composers using field recordings could make clearer through sound what their own connection with the source material is. Do compositions resulting from field recordings ever question socio-cultural, ethical, moral or political codes of practice within the composition itself? Perhaps the very the notion of a composer and her or his agency becomes counterproductive. Simon Emmerson reminds us, that “often the most interpenetrating multi-cultural exchanges are produced within performing ensembles without a ‘composer’ in sight”. (Emmerson, 2007: 127) I would venture to add that the type of exchange Emmerson discusses is and exchange based on sound, on listening. Joanna Demers concurs, writing that “at its heart, this discourse is concerned with signifying properties of

sound: whether sound can be heard separately from any social, cultural, natural or historical associations.” (Demers, 2010: 22)

Back in the field, Voeglin writes that the switch from absence to presence on behalf of the recordist is a move away from authorship, “where we do not seek to own the sounds of this world, to know and to have them, but understand ourselves to be part of its soundscape, not at its centre but simultaneous with it.” (Voeglin, 2016: 16)

This perhaps signifies a new way forward for thinking about compositions derived from field recordings. The recordist-composer should recognise the active agency they have in the field, but equally that their ‘finished’ work is not quite that – it is unfinished without the agency of a listener. As I continue to engage in this work, I understand the act of recording as a compositional decision, the presentation of a composition derived from that recording as a personal translation to be interpreted by a listener, the listeners’ reading as simply one ‘imprint’ between the heard and the recorded. All stages and roles carry an equal level of agency and authorship, and we should endeavour to be responsible recordists and composers, but above all, responsible listeners.

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