

Sound

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Sonic dis:connectivities

There is the assumption that sounds flow around the world, connecting people globally, enabling communication, and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Sounds in this idealized vision seem to be the medium of connectivity. Although Appadurai (1996) in his list of global flows does not refer directly to sound, we could think of ‘soundscapes’ as an addendum to ‘ideoscapes’ and ‘ethnoscapes’, contributing to the shrinking of the world. This seems particularly evident if we understand sound as a commodity, e.g. as hybrid ‘world music’, streamed through global platforms and available simultaneously at different places at the same time. But sound is much more than the increasing glocalization and commodification of once space-, time- and community-bound musical traditions, leading into new hybrid aesthetics and forms of ‘musical cosmopolitanism’ (Stokes 2007).

Sounds relate in many ways to globalisation and deglobalisation processes. Sound (as well as musicians and their musical instruments) as a substantial cultural element has travelled across the globe with colonial, ideological and commercial agendas, producing different sorts of cultural hybridity. But sound, including diverse forms of self-chosen and imposed silences, unsoundings, mutings, and noises, has also strengthened forms of disintegration and of racial, ethnic, and gendered exclusions. Sound in itself may signify inequalities, oppression and exclusions. Sound may irritate, or disturb, it may be indicative and reflective about injustice, violence (O’Connell and Castelo-Branco 2010; Velasco-Puffleau and Atlani-Duault 2020) and disconnectivities in a world of increasing inequalities.

Sound’s very nature as a floating medium, as an immaterial ephemeral element often taking an ‘in-between’ position between cultures, is, in this sense, a privileged medium that allows for a reading of history as simultaneously connected and disconnected. Sound continuously mobilizes and fosters, disconnects and subverts human relationships.

Ethnomusicology as a discipline is not only an ear-witness to the state of the world through documentation, aesthetically guided reflection or through attempts to point at the socio-cultural and ecological transformation of the world through a form of sonic journalism (Cusack 2016). The discipline resonates with the idea to amplify voices of marginalized, disadvantaged communities, of those who are unheard in the noisiness of our world. Those researchers who follow this agenda consider ethnomusicology as a corrective to global music markets, to forms of cultural exploitation, providing at least an academic lobby for those who remain unheard, and for indigenous voices and forms of knowledge. Ethnomusicologists

engage in attempts to ‘improve’ the world as a phonosphere shared by humans, animals and ecosystems, they dedicate themselves to balancing out these sounds and/or to ‘improve’ the sonic soundscape in urban settings (e.g. in the case of the World Soundscape Project established in the early 1970s).

More recent but equally important research links this shared phonosphere to issues of citizenship, cosmopolitanism and migration (Stokes 2023). There is also the attempt to think of sound as a resource for alternative artistic reflection (through work with archival material and revitalization of musical practices). Much of this reflection examines the potentiality of sound, its capacity to change or question realities and to address the inequalities in this world. There is more and more evidence that sounds possess an important agency in ‘how particular subjects and bodies, individuals and collectivities creatively negotiate systems of domination, gaining momentum and guidance through listening and being heard, sounding and unsounding particular acoustics of assembly and resistance’ (LaBelle 2018, 4). In this interpretation, every act of sounding out has the potential to subvert, to speak back to the systems and power relations which rule this world.

The career of Diana Herr (alias Deena), a German student who accidentally became a star of Ugandan popular music, is a story of connectivity through sound. As a 22-year-old student and social worker in East Africa, she attended concerts of local pop music in the Luganda language and soon attempted to cover these songs. Although she did not speak Luganda at the time, she soon became successfully connected to the local music industry. With her single ‘Mumulete’ (2015) she had a viral hit in the whole of East Africa as the first white woman to sing in Luganda. Despite her success in getting connected to the local culture and in successfully appropriating local music aesthetics, the whole story is also one of disconnectedness. Despite a positively connoted ‘cultural appropriation’ with inverse exoticism, her appearance also attracted criticism from African audiences and music journalists who contested the authenticity of her songs ‘being White on the outside, Black on the inside’ (Luggya 2015). Also the fact that friends and music arrangers had to translate her texts into Luganda is telling about her partial disconnectedness to local culture, leaving her ‘voiceless’, despite having a voice to sing.

Soundings as processes

The key to understanding sound differently, and as being invested with agency, is to speak of soundings as dynamic processes bound to social processes, political framings and/or specific aesthetic choices. Sounding out as an action is always a choice, bound to implicit and explicit social motivations. It may be a tactical or strategic choice related to the impulse to connect or to disconnect in social situations.

Sound also relates to absencing and presencing processes – audibilities and inaudibilities, which in turn relate to the visibilities and invisibilities in this world. The processuality of becoming heard, of acquiring a voice in the musical as well as in the metaphorical sense is what is most interesting here. Under which conditions do we perceive a sound, a voice or a word as welcome and under which conditions is its perception rejected?

The contemplation of the gradual disappearance of sounds due to the loss of musical knowledge, musical instruments and vocal traditions has been a constant source of self-legitimization for the discipline of ethnomusicology. Less attention has been given to research dedicated to processes under which sounds emerge and come into being with a certain functionality or social significance. Similarly, the disappearance and fading out of sounds has received relatively little attention in scholarly research. I would like to argue that focusing on how sounds emerge and disappear is of crucial importance to our understanding of the relationship of sound with power relations.

On the level of perception, the very act of listening is crucial to how we understand the phonosphere around us. We are constantly mis-hearing and over-hearing sonic events around us. There is a constant filtering, based on cultural assumptions, personal acculturations and listening conventions. Noise, for example, is often considered as undesirable. Attali (1985) therefore sees a potential to rehabilitate noise as a transgressive agent, working against the idea of ‘proper music’ as a structured attempt ‘to make people forget, make them believe, silence them’ (Attali 1985, 19). Silence should also be reconceptualized in this sense. In the established view, silence is predominantly seen as a ‘currency of power’ (Achino-Loeb 2005), as a powerless state of being deprived of voice or sound, as a form of speechlessness. Instead, silence is often a medium of communication, even of resistance to dominant discourses.

Another challenge is the colonial legacy and the resultant need to decolonize listening or at least invent new modes of listening, incorporating indigenous forms of ‘aurality’, reflecting the politics of the voice (Ochoa Gautier 2014).

If we discuss sound in relation to the field of dis:connection, we witness the important role of sound in dynamics of exclusion (→ **Exclusion/Inclusion**), of ‘muting’ voices, of creating atmospheres of fear, speechlessness and sonic suspension. One example of storing or collecting these undesired sounds of exclusion is the Manus recording project, a self-organized community platform that aims to revalidate seemingly insignificant sonic everyday events, in order to provide dignity and a voice to refugees on Manus Island (→ **Islands**), held in detention by Australian authorities (Manus Recording Project 2024). As an oral history project, documenting people’s experience of immigration detention, sound (ten-minute audio recordings) offers here a powerful way to respond to official discourses and

shows that connectedness through mobile communication persists even in situations of physical isolation.

Another example is the current revalidation of music once considered ‘subculture’ or ‘underground’, which therefore remained largely inaudible. The Gastarbeiter songs of the Turkish guest workers in Germany from the 1960s and 1970s, which mixed vulgar colloquial German with Turkish expressions and commented on exploitation and disintegration, have experienced an astonishing success in a post-migrant society. The ‘Deutschlandlieder – Almanya Türküleri’ Tour in 2021–2022, which brought on stage singers such as the 85-year-old Metin Türköz, one of the main protagonists of the songs of exile (*gurbet türküleri*) at the time, and second-generation musicians such as rapper Eko Fresh was a huge success (Deutschlandlieder 2024). In the same way, the two-volume edition ‘Songs of Gastarbeiter’ on TRIKONT label, researched and remixed by DJ Imran Ayata and Bülent Kullukcu, re-framed sonic memories once restricted to intimate private settings and kept in private tape collections.

The unheard becomes heard, the inaudible becomes audible due to changed political circumstances, due to a heightened sensitivity towards what is sounding, which contributes to the embracing of diversity in the public sphere. But what is the impulse behind the agenda to make the inaudible audible? Who is entitled to do so? What kind of intervening force is needed?

Ideally, this step from inaudibility to audibility should be taken by those who perform and who own these sounds. They should reconsider the potentialities of their recordings, the agency, the multiple options to re-listen, to re-evaluate soundings. In many cases, these initiatives to excavate sounds in the sense of a sonic archaeology come from sound art or artistic research projects, which question sonic events, their taken-for-granted social embeddedness, revealing their often multi-semantic character. One telling example is the ‘Evasive Choir’ project, realized in 2021 by interdisciplinary Bulgarian artist Antoni Rayzhekov. In thirty half-open tin cans with speakers, he explores the silences, rhetorical pauses and breaths of famous Bulgarian politicians, resulting in a ‘chorus of the muffled’. While there is a certain phonosphere which connects the sound installation, the voices, however, remain disconnected, bound to their can, leading a disconnected self-referential inner monologue. Rayzhekov is explicit in his description of the processuality of sounds which emerge and disappear: ‘We encounter the voice before, between, and beyond language in order to discover the depths of the unspoken, the silenced, the not-to-be-spoken, or that which is impossible to be voiced out’ (Rayzhekov 2021).

Sounding mobilities

The field of migration studies is a particularly fertile ground for the study of the interrelation between sound, connectivities and disconnectivities. If we want to look at or estimate the real effect of disconnectivities and policies of silencing, we can refer to the biographies of migrated musicians (see Le Menestrel 2020; Pistrick 2020). We enter here a field of human experience, characterized by creative deprivation, powerlessness, being stuck in waiting, converging with an imposed silence. The biography provides a looking-glass through which we can see how mobility also impacts the social status and recognition of a musician in Diasporic settings.

As my own long-term fieldwork with individual artists in German reception centres has shown, mobility often results in a creative impasse. Ibrahima, one of the musicians I have followed for almost five years, for example, was well integrated into the local music business in Burkina Faso, with excellent media connections and with a constant flow of revenue through the Burkina Agency of Music rights (SACEM Burkina Faso). Fleeing in 2009 from the death menaces of the IS to Germany, he suddenly found himself in the position of a dis-integrated, low-qualified worker in Germany and in the position of being a musician without an audience. The disconnectivity in this case is a deeply corporeal one. It implies, at least for the first year in Germany, a sort of voicelessness and a non-creative state of mind, because one is under constant pressure to proceed with one's asylum claim, learn the language and earn a living.

The musicians experience the disconnectivity on two levels. On the emotional level, 'networks of care and support and affection are sometimes significantly dispersed' (Morley 2017, 140). On the level of creativity, disconnectivity means that access to music production and dissemination is blocked permanently. Disconnectivity, especially for creative migrants, is therefore often perceived as an imposed and deeply violent state, which may lead to the loss of social, entrepreneurial, or professional networks, the loss of artistic freedom and even to a 'cultural trauma'.

Only after a seemingly never-ending transitional period, did Ibrahima gain access to performance venues of the Diaspora community in which he became integrated as a guest musician. But also in this case disconnectivity and connectivity interrelate. The singer remains, despite his loss of social status and his lowered social status in Germany, connected to networks of music production and dissemination back in his home country. He produced, for example, a commissioned election song for the candidate of the opposition which was played during election campaigns all over the country. Key in this context was the mobile phone (→ **Communication Technologies**) as a space-shrinking technology and an effective creative tool, enabling self-empowerment, self-realization and a degree of connectedness. At the

same time, the mobile itself can be understood as a ‘capsular’ ‘technology with a tendency to reinforce the narrowing of social bonds’ (Morley 2017, 12).

Ultimately, musicians are actively seeking (new) audiences beyond the Diasporic networks, virtual networks and imagined ones. This quest has an interesting ambiguous dimension in terms of dwelling and of (re)attachment to places. On the one hand, migrant musicians try to produce their music in spaces between the real and the imagined, in a space of ‘in-betweenness’ with multiple affective, spatial and symbolic attachments where a new creativity and new sounds emerge. On the other hand, through musicking itself (including the act of (co)listening and amateur music practices), they nourish a continuous longing to find ‘one’s space’ in a physical, social and metaphorical sense, which may include modalities of belonging virtually. These spaces of belonging may be ephemeral and vanishing but they are considered as a productive way of temporal-bound dwelling resulting in the construction of a creative space of one’s own. They allow musicians to re-assert their own belonging and to creatively (re)orient themselves in a new environment.

Conclusion

Sound is still an underestimated medium in social science research which allows for the transition between connectedness and disconnectedness. It helps to maintain ties to memories, and embodied experiences of the past, and as a medium allows us to dwell, to reorient oneself and to find a shelter in new, potentially hostile places. If we re-direct our sense of hearing away from sonic objects and instead turn our ears to the unheard, and unsounding, we might discover that socially speaking, it is increasingly important what happens before and after any sounding event. It matters how soundings are embedded into silences and non amplified framings and how these frames influence how sounds are perceived.

Thinking through sound means thinking connectivities and disconnectivities through the senses, and through embodied performative experiences. It also points to the importance and value of aesthetics in the smooth transition from connectedness to disconnectedness, as it is especially the ‘way’, the ‘style’, the ‘timbre’, a certain intonation, through which the sounding becomes meaningful and (mis) understood.

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