



The author in the Oslo City shopping centre.
Photo: Dan Petter Neegard

Listening and Listening Intentions

by Henrik Hellstenius

My background is from the more traditional field of contemporary music, rather than from the soundscape art tradition, and the confrontation with soundscape perspectives gives rise to a number of questions. My questions are about listening, and the listening intentions one might have while experiencing soundscape art. In one of his articles in this book, Jøran Rudi points out three main categories of listening: the referential listening, the reflective listening, and the contextual listening. My questions are:

- Do we listen differently when the sound is not organized in the manner of music than when it is?
- Do we use the same cognitive concepts when listening to soundscapes as we do when listening to music?
- Does referential, reflective and contextual listening exist separately or do they merge in us?

Listening to soundscapes – listening to music

The act of listening is a highly diverse act. It can be the simple task of gaining an orientation in a landscape, it can be the more complex act of filtering out the needed information in noisy surroundings, or it can be a deeper act of cognition of sonic developments through music. The sound communicates common references, emerging from present events, objects or places – references that are connected to shared history or everyday life, or other common references. At the same time, sound can also activate personal references to real-life events, objects or places; references that bring more individual and inner remembrances or understandings to life. The same sounds, sound environments or music can also potentially feed into ‘pure’ sound experiences, which more loosely connect to the outer, real-life world. All these types of experiences might happen concurrently.

The Italian composer Luigi Nono was very concerned with the uniqueness of the perceptive act of listening, the exploration of our relationship with the world and ourselves through our ears. He said that listening creates a break with the cognitive concepts that lie

in our languages and in the images. Nono stated that we, through the act of deep listening,¹ are able to break with the ‘strong ties our culture holds to the link between image, linear narrative and the words’.² One could say that we are granted access to other parts of ourselves through our ears. We understand ourselves and the world differently through deep listening. So, to come back to my question: do I listen differently when listening to a natural, real-life soundscape than when I listen to music?

Should I listen to Luc Ferrari’s: *Presque Rien no. 1* from 1970 in the same way, and with the same intention, as when I listen to piece by Luigi Nono, Johan Sebastian Bach or Madonna? Ferrari’s work is a tape composition. It is in three parts, and the sounds in the piece are taken from field recordings from the window of a house the composer rented in a small village by the Adriatic Sea. What we hear is a time-reduced version of recordings made from sunrise to midday. After making the recordings, Ferrari cut and edited the tapes so as to make them sound ‘more true than true’ – or, one might say – more real than reality. *Presque Rien no. 1* was my first experience with soundscape art. It intrigued me then, and the question of how to listen to it still remains with me; how do I listen to this type of work, which places itself in between reality and fiction, in between real life and art? Do I listen to it with an aesthetic filter – listen for the gradual shifting of the overall textures, changing colors and densities as the day breaks? Do I group the different sound objects into musical phrases, such as the motorbike passing, the fisherman yelling, the distant sound of a boat? Or do I listen to it purely as real-life sounds, as I might have done if I had been present in the village at the time? Am I concerned with the origin of the sounds, or with the musical interaction that I can infer? Or both?

Since I listen to this work on my stereo from a CD, I will probably try to understand the sounds aesthetically. The piece is presented as a ‘masterpiece’ in the booklet. So I would conclude that my ears are turned to the reflective listening mode; I listen for the different layers of sounds, creating musical ‘motives’ of children shouting and cars passing and the different timbres of sounds, the building up of a more dense background, and an overall tension as the day starts and more events and people enter the soundspace. I tend to believe that I, because of the parameters surrounding *Presque Rien no. 1*, perceive it as a piece with sounds that are ‘musical’. In my listening they group themselves into musical



objects, and form smaller and larger auditive structures. Perceived and interpreted in this fashion, they become ‘music’.

Intentionality and discovery

One of the most interesting challenges for art music is to ask what level of intention is needed to make a musical moment valuable as music. The questions raised by soundscape works and other works more open to the sound of the ‘real’ world, have an effect on the more conventionally composed music as well, since they expand the possibilities for our experience of sound. This wider approach to both sounds, and the intention of displaying them, inevitably creates feedback to the more conventionally composed music and proposes the question: what kind of auditive information is really needed to create musical meaning? As Jøran Rudi quotes Bill Fontana: ‘the world is musical at any given moment’. Fontana’s point is also applicable in a normal concert hall setting; there are other sounds and sound sources, other types of meaningful interplay between sound and sound sources than the ones coming from the stage and the instruments. This challenges the composers and musicians to take into account a broader field of sounds and sound sources for their music – a practice we have seen (or rather heard) from a long list of contemporary composers like Peter Ablinger,

Carola Bauckholt and Christina Kubisch. In several of the pieces by Ablinger and Backholt, sounds from the ‘outside world’ are integrated, either acoustically or as recorded soundfiles played back concurrently with the acoustic instruments. And the question arises both in regard to the more traditional sonic arts and soundscape art: in the compositional process, how much intention is needed to make the music valuable as a musical experience? This is an old question in the avant-garde movement. The composer John Cage and others have formulated it in both words and ‘composed’ music where the sounds and the presentations of them are indeterminate and therefore not an expression of a composer’s intention. The inclusion of soundscape elements might propose a renewed focus on this question for more conventional composers – hearing meaningful and highly complex soundscapes from either nature or culture.

One of my own few projects in the field of soundscape was when I was leading a guided listening tour inside a shopping centre in central Oslo. The guided tour was part of a new music festival called Happy Days, which in its entirety took place inside this centre. I gathered a group of people, talked to them about aspects and qualities of listening strategies, such as listening for the timbre, density, layers of the different sounds and sound objects, as well as sensitivity to any possible connections and forms created by the different objects. I gave each of the members of the group a pair of earmuffs so as to prevent them from being bombarded by the noisy surroundings between the spots I had chosen for the listening experiences. The different places at the shopping center presented different timbres and combinations of sounds for the listeners. Through this we opened the understanding that it is possible to hear ‘meaningful’ sounds in an aesthetical manner, even in the chaotic sound environment of a shopping centre. The best parts of the tour were when everybody would lie down and listen to the deep rumbling sounds of the escalators, and when the group was scattered around in a hardware store, listening with closed eyes for the sound objects emerging from the actions and communication between customers and employees.

The intention behind these guided tours was clearly to discover the familiar sounds with a new listening intention, in order to give the sounds a new meaning. As a guide, I took on the role of a composer, indicating meanings and possible ways of listening, and shaped the timing of events by leading the group around

while ordering them to put on or take off their earmuffs. I am not at all implying that the same people could not have discovered the hidden beauty of the different sounds in such a noisy place without my guidance, but I do believe that a focus placed on the listening intentions is important when asking people to explore music as well as soundscapes. Listening is a complex experience since listening intentions are always individual, differing from one listener to another, and vary with the listening experience, the knowledge of the field, previous experiences, the degree of openness to new musical expressions, and so forth. But nevertheless, there are ways of indicating possible intentions to the listener, as I experienced when I saw *Presque Rien no. 1* described as a ‘masterpiece’. These words alone strongly indicating the type of listening intentions I should have when approaching to it, for better or worse.

I believe that an increasing number of ‘conventional’ composers and musicians implement field recordings and sound from the outer musical world into their music, exploring its musical potential. As a result of this practice, I believe that more listeners of conventional music will start experiencing pure soundscapes as aesthetic objects. The increasing numbers of works that combine soundscape elements with more conventional musical material raise the question of how these everyday sounds or sounds from nature integrate with and expand the musical as well as the contextual meaning of the music. Using more of the sounds from the outside world in combination with conventional instruments might change both the way we listen and the way we understand music. It brings the basic material of the art form closer to our personal everyday surroundings, and might possibly also change the way we listen to our surroundings when not in a concert hall, bringing with us the aesthetical approach to the world of sounds around us, and exploring the exciting combination of referential, reflective and contextual listening.

1. ‘Deep listening’ is listening without anything else occupying the listener’s attention. The perceptive apparatus is directed towards the sound, experiencing and interpreting it.
2. Program booklet for Festival D’Automne á Paris 1987 p. 110 (Translation by the author).