

Deep Listening to the Sound An Interview with Francisco López

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Marek Jeziński: How would you describe your personal experience of city sounds? To what extent are they a random collection of sound signals?

Francisco López: There is very little true randomness in any urban – or natural – sound environment. Randomness is an overrated notion that tends to give rise to misconceptions on listening to the world. Any perception of “city sounds” is naturally dependent upon our listening mode: from the mundane identification of sources, which we need for our daily life, to the most profound listening imaginable, which we should need even more, as it transports us from the mundane to the phenomenal.

MJ: What is the meaning of the soundscape category in your artistic work? Would you say that the soundscape of a given city can be perceived as a narrative telling a story about a particular place?

FL: I have no interest in the concept of the so-called “soundscape”. I don’t think that being able to identify some cities by their sounds – in some cases it is possible to some extent – leads us anywhere beyond the mere identification. Any imaginable “music” or “story” from these sounds would certainly be in the eye of the beholder.

MJ: In your artistic projects you keep referring to a variety of soundscapes: there are sometimes sounds of nature recorded in settings exotic to a European listener, at other times you use recordings from locations typical for modern people, such as cities or industrial factories, that is, the sound produced by working machinery and people at work. For example, one of your pieces, “Warszawa restaurant”, refers to a specific place mentioned in the title, in another work we can find references to New York. On the other hand, many of your works have no titles, which is supposed to turn the listeners’ attention to the act of listening, rather than pre-determine the reception of a piece by its title, name or location. Am I right, thinking

that your intention was to leave the recording as an open work, indicating to the listener numerous interpretational possibilities?

FL: Yes, I find openness of content and experience much more interesting and compelling than openness of form, which has been sort of a dogmatic obsession in music over many decades now.

***MJ:* In the piece called “#321” one can hear the industrial sounds of the machines working at the seashore. The noises produced by the machines drown out the calm sound of the sea. Well, perhaps it is only my interpretation, maybe there are neither machines nor sea in the recording... What do you expect your listeners to do in such cases?**

FL: The undefined, the unexplained and the intentionally cryptic provide listeners simultaneously with both freedom and responsibility. If the act of listening is the true creative act – and I believe it is – if there was anything I was expecting from listeners, it would be precisely that: creation.

***MJ:* Do you approach field recordings – such as “Wind (Patagonia)” – as music? Do you try to find in them some form of structure or composition based on harmony? Which approach to the sound do you favour – the one based on looking for musical structures in recorded sounds or the one without such musical expectations?**

FL: As it is conceptually and aesthetically understood today, I have very little interest in canonical “field recordings”. I have always been fascinated by sound as a generator-medium of spatial-temporal experience and as a gate to access layers of concreteness and spirit that are hardly accessible by other means; at least for those of us with a particular innate sensitivity to sound. I don’t think “music” is defined by the use of instruments or even the intentional production of sound. Instead, when listening is a profound act of will upon sounds, music unfolds naturally.

***MJ:* Could you share with us your observations on the significance of digitization in field recording? Without technology one can hardly imagine any form of recording, but don’t you think that today we have become too dependent on technology?**

FL: One of the most relevant features defining human nature is its consubstantial dependence on technology; in fact, not just dependence but the imbrication of technology in the very fabric of humanness to the level of cyborgization. Digitization is largely irrelevant in this process. I think the more relevant consequence of recording technology – since its inception – has been not the possibility of re-enactment (systematically and inconsequentially despised as insufficient) but rather the historically unprecedented access to the sonic concrete, something that is tremendously facilitated and made explicit by how machines “listen”.

MJ: Does the better quality of recording and sound processing equipment bring us closer to the real/ authentic sound? Do you think that it is possible at all to recreate the real sound in recordings?

FL: Changes in the so-called traditional “audio quality” (“better” equipment, higher resolution, etc.) do very little to get us closer to anything “real/authentic”. In fact, they typically do the opposite. What moves us away from things and from “the real” is representation in its many forms: reproduction, recreation, simulation... For instance, I think that what we need today is not virtual reality – we already have an overwhelming amount of it in our daily lives – but somehow the opposite: what I call *real virtuality*; i.e., a true, rich, profound form of relating to what we already know is virtual. In stark contrast to what is usually assumed, sonic representation brings with it abstraction and indexicality, thus reducing sounds to mere properties of (causal) things. I believe that sounds by themselves are as much things as anything else, at the same ontological level. All sounds are therefore “real” and disembodied by their very nature. Concerning recording gear, I’ve always seen its representational potential as its least interesting aspect. If representation is not the game, our microphones and recorders suddenly turn into more interesting tools, as ontological probes. What is truly interesting about non-cognitive machines (e.g., sound recorders, photo cameras) is not their reproduction/representational capabilities (always deficient, according to the popular-tech lore) but precisely their lack of thought while perceiving (something we humans can’t do), that is, their awesome ontological proficiency.

MJ: Let’s imagine that you have organized a kind of an aural safari in the city. What types of sound sources would you advise the safari participants to look for? Where would you advise them to start their recordings?

FL: “Aural safari” wouldn’t really fit my concept of a sonic exploration of an environment..., but OK, let’s assume some kind of sound environment exploration: definitely, my recommendation would be to be open to any findings; find, don’t search. That’s the way I normally work, since – as a composer, as opposed to, say, a sound designer – I fortunately have the freedom to choose, listen and create without any need of finding/recording any particular sounds. Second: stay away from prototypical “sound markers/indexes”, stay away from a descriptive approach... in short, stay away from representation.

MJ: And the final question about your inspirations: could you share with us your musical and aural preferences? What type of sounds do you particularly enjoy? Could you name the artists, musicians or composers important to you?

FL: I don’t have specific *types* of sounds I like or dislike. It all depends on the *actual* sounds themselves, on an individual basis, and on the context of the project/composition. As for the artists working with sound whose work I find compelling, there are

many; unfortunately, many of them haven't gained the recognition they'd deserve. To name a few: Asmus Tietchens, Joe Colley, Miguel A. García, Olivia Block, Cranioclast, Lee Patterson...

Francisco López (b. 1964)

An internationally recognized Spanish sound artist born in Madrid, musician and composer of experimental and avant-garde music, a recipient of numerous awards (e.g. Sound Art Competition, Quartz Award, Prix Ars Electronica). He is the director and curator of Fonoteca de Música Experimental y Arte Sonoro (SONM), the sound archive dedicated to non-commercial promotion of experimental music and sound art.

Francisco López is one of the most prominent artists of the experimental music scene and sound art. His works are based on the principle of "deep listening"; he is interested in crossing the boundaries between the sonosphere of industrial spaces and the sounds of the wilderness. He is committed to disseminating knowledge about sound studies, publishing critical essays, such as "Music Dematerialized?", "Sonopolis", "Environmental sound matter", "Sonic & Creatures" available on his website. The list of his works includes several hundred entries, out of which the record *La Selva* (1998), featuring the field recordings of the Costa Rican rain forest, gained greatest recognition. He has presented his music and sound installations at concerts and music festivals, as well as in museums and galleries in many countries all over the world, including France, Italy, Great Britain, Russia, Finland, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Slovenia, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Columbia, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Mexico, the USA, Canada, Israel, China, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, South Africa.

For more information see the artist's webpage:

<http://www.franciscolopez.net/index.html>