

In Search of Urban Sounds An Interview with Enrico Coniglio

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Marek Jeziński: How would you describe the sound of the city? What does it mean to you? Is it a random collection of noises or perhaps something more organized and structured?

Enrico Coniglio: The contemporary city is a problematic subject, it is the place of dispersion, fragmentation and, at the same time, re-aggregation, where each fragment is a piece of a gigantic puzzle. The urban acoustic context that we experience is, to a large extent, bewildering, made up largely of sound elements placed in the background, difficult to trace back to an exact source of origin and merging to produce the so-called “background noise”. Your question reminds me of the “fog effect” produced in old cathode-ray tube television sets. It is to this set of indistinct sounds we perceive when experiencing the city that we could be tempted to attribute an ordered structure, perhaps just to give chaos some form of order. But it is rather a kind of indistinct noise (we use the same term in audio or video jargons), in which it is difficult to draw any distinctions. And then our role comes into play: it is up to us to understand and decode this acoustic puzzle and its final re-composition.

MJ: Do you believe that cities are in a way defined by their soundscapes? Can these soundscapes be subjected to semiological analysis?

EC: Believing that the city, in its formal reality, defines its soundscape is in a sense correct. But the city is not a sentient organism; it is the logic of the settlement that defines its soundscape. Understanding the city and its landscape can be an operation of de-coding in the proper sense, that is, of reading the signs that tell – and testify to – the history of a certain place. In its semiological interpretation, the city is, in fact, a set of languages and acts of communication, and, therefore, an object intended to be read. In this sense it is possible to think that a narrative approach can help the settlement community to understand its role in the construction of urban space and therefore, by transposition, of the acoustic space. On the other hand, I am not convinced that the environmental sound is similar to a musical score – this idea too

often has given place to simplistic or even romantic interpretations of the soundscape. It is also indisputable that some sounds that our ear captures (drones, resonances, signals) refer to a musical memory to which we have been exposed in our education, but this approach does not convince me at all.

MJ: Is your hometown in any way defined by specific sounds?

EC: My city, Venice, is quite different from the ones described above and, although it was profoundly transformed between the 1800s and the 1900s, it did not undergo the major changes that homogenized the cities of the rest of Italy. On the one hand, the city today has its own peculiarity in which the sound of water clearly dominates and symbolically reveals its historic port type nature; on the other hand, the tourist industry has substantially modified the “topophony” of the traditional town. However, it is possible to analyze different macro areas that – due to their homogeneity – have specific acoustic characteristics, such as, to put it simply, the historic city, the lagoon and the mainland city. Everything, therefore, depends on the scale of observation. What interests me, personally, is to observe the overlaps between these spaces, to understand what happens in the margin areas – where phenomena become uncertain, landscapes – contaminated and the very concept of specificity, of sound identity, becomes blurred.

MJ: In your artistic projects you keep referring to a variety of soundscapes, sometimes recording the sounds of nature in what seems to be an exotic setting to a European listener, and at other times working in typical locations for contemporary people, such as cities and factories, machinery and people at work. You have recorded people working in Murano, at the production of glass, or in the olive mill. Would you say that listening to the city and people working there involves searching for the sound of a specific kind? What sounds are of particular interest to you?

EC: Listening to the sounds of traditional work, those you cite for example, is extremely fascinating, but it also makes you discover how a craft has evolved in the face of technological advances that have taken place in its specific context. The artistic glass furnace in Murano is characterized today by the sound of glass melting furnaces, a massive drone that tends to drown out all the minute noises of work that is still largely artisanal, made with the mouth (blown glass) and with traditional tools (pliers, scissors, moulds). Likewise, a modern oil mill is now completely mechanized, characterized by heavy sounds, where the human voice is overwhelmed by the noise of the machines and leaves little room for a bucolic imaginary. What interests me is to investigate the “marginal” sound, in the apparent contrasts between man and machine, city and countryside, landscape and mandscape, where the acoustic sources merge and interpenetrate – where there is contradiction and above all where classifications and catalogues lose their meaning.

MJ: Please tell us about your beginnings in field recording (e.g. recordings of cities or nature – both animate or inanimate forms). Admittedly, field recording is a niche hobby. When working with sound, young people usually choose more traditional forms of sound production, such as using musical instruments, forming music groups or producing records, which is also a significant part of your career. What were your first encounters with field recording and how did you get involved in it?

EC: I was born in the 1970s in a city still inhabited by its permanent residents, something that Venice today unfortunately has largely lost. Since I was a child my ear was, therefore, trained to listen: think about a city without cars! I recently recovered some old audio cassettes dating back to the 1980s, on which I found the recordings made with a cheap Walkman, when I didn't know anything about the history of phonography. Actually, I consider myself a musician, not a producer of electronic music. Many years later, around the mid-2000s, I rediscovered field recording through listening to the web, webzines and print media.

MJ: Do you approach field recordings – such as the work of the olive mill in Umbria – as music? If so, do you try to find – in the sounds or their recordings – some form of structure or composition based on harmony?

EC: As I mentioned above, field recording is not music, although listening to it we can identify structures, rhythmic sequences, even notes and harmonies that refer to our Western concept of music. My work on the mill in Tordibetto, in Umbria, does not reveal musical elements, but rather intends to explore the timbre characteristics of sound as an acoustic phenomenon, with an almost “macro” approach. It must be said that sound exists in an ontological sense, but capturing it and working on it is a poetic action – of making, which constructs meaning.

MJ: Could you share with us some observations on the relations between digitization and field recording? Without technology one can hardly imagine any form of recording, but don't you think that what we now experience is a form of complete dependence on technology?

EC: It is clear that without technological advancement man could not aspire to capture and archive sound and that since the first recording of “Au Clair de la Lune” in the far 1860 by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville there has been a great leap forward. The truth is that we are all victims of the so-called “technological primitivism” and that without digital or analogical support, we would not be able to practise our art, profession or research.

MJ: Sound artists are now using much more efficient microphones, better sound processing and audio noise reduction software than they did in the past. Is it getting us closer to the real/authentic sound? Is it possible at all to recreate the real sound – a more authentic picture of the world?

EC: In a sense, if our ears are the most sophisticated microphone available, we can claim that with technological progress we can build microphones that record sound in an increasingly

realistic way. But is this really what interests us? Rebuilding reality? For what purpose if not for simple entertainment? Given that the acoustic environment is a low-fidelity environment, even outside of urban contexts I mean, given that the microphones add their timbre to the recording, given that the entire recording chain “colours” the sound and adds noise, given that the sample / rate is primarily a reduction of authentic reality (does authentic reality exist?), I believe that making field recordings should not have the purpose of reproducing reality, nor should it pretend to make this reality more “transparent” than it is. The acoustic reality of a place is something spurious, rough if we want. I am convinced that inventing the “other” reality should not be a fictional operation, but an interpretation.

***MJ:* Let’s imagine that you have invited some people to participate in the aural safari in a city. What types of sounds would you like to record and what would you expect other participants to record in their search? Which city would you recommend for such an experience?**

EC: If we talk about Venice, I would invite the participants first of all to get a mental map of the city. So as to base one’s own research in the field according to analytical criteria, setting rules for oneself and not simply relying on one’s ears. This is because, frankly, I am not interested in acoustic photographs of places – we are not audio tourists (!), but rather discoverers of invisible textures. What interests me is to understand why there is a certain sound, where it originates from, which underlying economic structures and what uses of the territory there are behind the established society. I am interested in questioning what possible critical aspects of the city may emerge from guided, collective and individual listening. Venice is a city completely different from the rest of the world; I would start an urban safari by asking the question: is it possible to understand what Venice is today from its “topophony”? Listening to a soundscape is always a journey through time, into the causality of events and human actions performed on the environment.

***MJ:* How would you describe aural interactions between people and the city? People co-create the city through sounds – their presence marks human presence in the world. How can we then hear and interpret human actions in sound?**

EC: I suppose very few people who live in the city pay attention to the acoustic environment around them. This is because we typically take everything we are accustomed to for granted. We activate our attention only when we find ourselves in a situation in which normality and everyday life are suspended or in front of what appears exotic and thus interesting. Our attitude is, therefore, passive, one would say, without any moral judgment. I am amazed at how a regular passenger on the metro is able to bear with perfect indifference the screech of the brakes of the carrier on which he travels anonymously every morning to his workplace. The truth is that we tend to accept that the contemporary city, for more than a century now since the automobile replaced the horse carriage, has been an indistinct mixture of sounds that reflect our way of living in the place: a kind of pervasive acoustic dis-acclimatization of our Western culture.

MJ: And the final question: could you share with us your musical and aural preferences? What sounds do you enjoy and what sounds do you detest? Do you have your favourite musicians, composers or sound artists? What artists active in field recording are important to you?

EC: In everyday life I listen to a great variety of sounds, but this also depends on the use I make of music at various times of the day, when working, walking down the street, driving, cooking ... I don't have a particular preference for artists in themselves but for some of their works. The works of classical composers, such as Alvin Lucier, Eliane Radigue, Bruno Madera, Luigi Nono, are very dear to me. Recently, I follow the work of BJNilsen, Phill Niblock, Chris Watson, Andrea Polli, Jana Winderen, Jez Riley French, Kate Carr, Daniel Menche, Eric La Casa, Simon Scott and the labels that release their work. Some Italian friends who also, but not only, operate in the area of field recording and whom I follow with pleasure are Giulio Aldinucci, Giovanni Lami, Giuseppe Ielasi, Attila Faravelli, Francesco Giannico, Nicola Di Croce, but I would not like to sound impolite forgetting to mention someone I care about. And I obviously appreciate all the artists I invite to my netlabel Galaverna [www.galaverna.org]. Oh, I have forgotten ... I hate reggaeton, opera and Italian rock!

Enrico Coniglio (b. 1975)

An Italian composer and sound artist, born in Venice. In his art he combines musical inspirations (ambient, classical and contemporary music, electroacoustics) with field recording, sounds produced by various environments and drones. His artistic projects are connected with landscape aesthetics and depict the loss of identity and evolution of areas inhabited by people (e.g. the Venetian Lagoon). In addition, he produces soundtracks for short feature films, documentaries, art exhibitions and theatre performances.

Enrico Coniglio has cooperated with other artists, working on collaborative music projects, such as "Open to the Sea", "Tavoloparlante", "Lemures", "Aqua Dorsa", "Herion" and "My Home, Sinking". Apart from numerous concerts in Italy, he has presented his sound works in Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, Russia, at music festivals, in art galleries, theatres and concert halls. Together with Leandro Pisano and Nicola di Croce he runs the netlabel Galaverna, promoting field recordings and soundscapes.

For more information, visit the artist's webpage: <http://www.enricoconiglio.com>