
# Sound Moves: Intersections of popular music studies, mobility studies and soundscape studies.

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*Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 2013 7:01

The online version of this article can be found at:

https://doi.org/10.65968/TJPT4330

Chapman, Owen. "Sound Moves: Intersections of popular music studies, mobility studies and soundscape studies". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media. 7.01* (2013). Web. https://doi.org/10.65968/TJPT4330

# Sound Moves: Intersections of popular music studies, mobility studies and soundscape studies

Sound is motion. As vibration, sound travels through air, water, solid materials, as an affective transfer of energy from molecule to molecule–a moving flow. But let us not prioritize an acoustic or physicalist framework, as though 'vibration' were somehow the truest description of sound in its essence. Sounds travel through networks, memories, between people and places, from performers to audiences, through time as much as space, both live and as sonic potential stored in mechanical and electronic recordings, digital files and musical instruments. Sound is constantly on the move, at the same time as it resounds in the singular sonorous moments in which it is heard.

Jean Luc Nancy claims that listening to sound and music fixes us in the instant of hearing at the same time as it propels us towards the future through expectation. As he says,

"At every instant music promises its development only in order the better to hold and open the instant–the note, the sustaining, the beat–outside of development, in a singular coincidence of movement and suspense….That is what sound resounds in: it demands itself again in order to be what it is: sonorous" (Nancy 2010, 66-67).

Such movement is at the heart of the considerations that link the different contributions to this special issue of *Wi*, focused on the intersections of popular music, mobility and soundscape studies. The theme of the conference that originally brought these works together, "Music and Environment"[1], provides a further touchstone in the articulation of these fields–through pointing towards an "aural definition of space" (Arkette 2004, 160). This phenomenological conception asserts the body as a center of experience, where the subject and the external world cannot be intrinsically divided. Space is made relational, it is made into 'place' through our perception of it (Massey 2005). This perception is multi-sensorial, with sound as a foundational element. Entering a new environment, one quickly receives information as to its spatial qualities through sonic reflections, even before conducting a visual scan. As a relational concept, space depends on known qualities to provide context for features that are yet to be revealed. Such knowledge can be the result of prior experiences (e.g. having visited a place before), but also manifests temporally through information encountered more or less quickly through different sensory modalities. This flicker between known and unknown is reminiscent of the cycles of popular music, where 'tradition' is respected, constructed and continuously transformed by the technologies, practices and people that constitute it.

[1] Music and Environment: Place, Context, Conjuncture: IASPM-Canada Annual Conference, Montreal, June 16th 2011. The conference was made possible through support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

The focus on movement in mobilities studies can be paralleled with the focus on walking in soundscape studies. The aural perception of space championed by the latter is based in a practical methodology of movement. The soundwalk as a practice explored by Hildegard Westerkamp, Murray Schaffer, Andra McCartney and others, stipulates a consistent re-localisation of our listening perspective as paramount to coming to terms with the sonic character of an environment. Mobility studies similarly takes the possibility of movement as a central conceptual tool for tracing the differential mobilities enabled by the myriad technologies, social regulations, cultural practices and geographic contingencies that circumscribe everyday life across the globe. Linked to such considerations are contemporary transnational practices of technologically-mediated sound production, consumption, and diffusion that are at the heart of popular music studies.

The applicability of movement as a methodological and epistemological strategy resounds through all of the pieces in this special edition. Andra McCartney's contribution references the notion of listening praxis vis a vis sonic fields such as popular music studies, soundscape studies and acoustic ecology. By 'praxis' McCartney references the putting into action of theory and ideas, and the various ways in which the specifics of such mobilizations represent differing underlying logics and intellectual commitments. Her analysis focuses on a close reading of how the terms 'soundscape' and 'acoustic ecology' are operationalized in a selection of contemporary books on sound environments, drawn from the field of what Sterne (2012b) has recently dubbed "sound studies".

David Madden's paper analyzes the current static, 'conservationist' approach to the legacy of the Ondes Martenot – a dusty jewel in terms of the history of electronic musical instrument design (invented in 1928 – see *Wi* Spring 2009 issue.) Madden argues that this approach has resulted in a freezing of the Ondes' contemporary significance. This is due both to the lack of remaining functional models of the instrument as well as a conservatism on the part of the Ondes 'scene', which values classical musical repertoire written expressly for the Ondes during the 20th century over new potential styles that have emerged from contemporary popular music.

Jean-Paul Thibaud's essay deals with urban ambiances, sonic environments and sensory perception, and involves the question of mobility very directly through a discussion of the technique of 'commented city walks'. This method stems from Thibaud's (and the CRESSON school's) approach to soundscape studies, rooted in the notion of the 'sonic effect' as a central category for understanding and describing sound experiences. This approach is combined with the assertion that 'comments' from soundscape listeners can be compiled, filtered and analyzed as forms of phenomenological data. Comments are treated not in terms of their quantifiability (i.e., "How many times do certain key terms appear?"), but as privileged access points into the polyglotinous (i.e., incorporating various languages or forms of expression) mental 'dialogue' that is active, engaged perception.

Lewis Kaye's essay draws on earlier work from Thibaud (2003) and also recent scholarship by Samuel Thulin (2011, 2012), asserting that a person who listens to mobile personal sound media (MPSM) is not cut off from her/his soundscape in the way that

authors like Michael Bull (2000, 2007) have suggested. Kaye asks: "Rather than presume that personal stereos are used simply to shut out the sounds of the city, how might we deploy the technology in a way that draws upon, and draws us into, our everyday world of sound?". In answering this question, Kaye references two of his own binaural sound art projects (YOU ARE HERE and Toronto Transit Soundscapes). Challenging the "refuge through sonic bubble" understanding of MPSM, Kaye traces a link from this contemporary form of conceptualizing the "Walkman effect" (see Hosokawa 1984) to Murray Schafer's acoustic ecological model for soundscape study (as exemplified by the latter's book The Tuning of the World (1977)). For the Schaferian acoustic ecologist, MPSM are a perfect example of the refuge one is forced to seek from the noisy, sonically polluted environment in which the modern city dweller finds him/herself – a refuge that has the side effect of even further alienating the user from the soundscape around them. In opposition to this 'schizophonic' model for MPSM, Kaye demonstrates how such technology can in fact deepen a user's relationship to the modern, urban soundscape that they inhabit. While such soundscapes may contain many elements that exceed "human scale" (Westerkamp 2007), this should not equate a conception of the modern urbanite as under sonic siege.

Helmi Järviluoma's piece advances 'pleasure' as a central element in thinking about sonic perception. Her contribution suggests different mechanisms for an affective treatment of our relationship to sounds of the environment, inflecting her ruminations through what she calls 'small agency', or the imperceptible, minute ways in which we act and make decisions based on accumulated knowledges. Presenting examples from her One Hundred Finnish Soundscapes and Acoustic Environments in Change research

projects, Jarvïluoma addresses the vagueness of the 'positive' approach that some have asserted for soundscape studies, looking to ground and complicate this aesthetic/activist orientation through a discussion of specific examples that connect processes of soundscape immersion, construction and mnemonic recall to the types of pleasure a listener can derive from sounds and music. Part and parcel of such considerations are the different ways in which such experiences affect moments of 'small agency' within our daily lives. As she says: "Very often people weave into their lengthy stories [about notable soundscape experiences] both the sounds of music, and other environmental sounds without making a significant distinction between the two".

David Paquette was the respondent during the plenary panel at the 2011 IASPM-Canada conference that brought McCartney, Thibaud, and Jarvïluoma together. His contribution is included in this special edition as an introduction to the research profiles and affiliations linking these invited scholars.

Sara Bannerman's piece speaks to the 'mobility' of capital vis a vis popular music and other forms of cultural production, albeit on a micro-level in terms of 'crowdfunding'. As she states, "while crowdfunding may ultimately make funding more mobile, it may also make creation, labour, and funding more disconnected from important forms of stability and support". Comparing and contrasting 'crowdsourcing' with 'crowdfunding', Bannerman outlines important differences in terms of the cultural significance and resilience of these two contemporary mechanisms for the redistribution of labour and capital, highlighting important emergent systems and practices. She enumerates the significant progressive features of crowdfunding, while exposing important hegemonic

forces that undermine its potential to afford new mechanisms and conditions of cultural production.

The mobility of micro-capital discussed by Bannerman parallels (and is in some senses modeled after) the networked mobility afforded to sound files through 30-plus years of audio digitization and online file sharing (with the 1992 standardization of the MP3 format as an key moment – see Sterne 2012a). The final essay in this special edition conceptualizes and configures these elements into the new marketplace frontier for independent musicians who are increasingly required to develop online DIY 'entrepreneurial' practices for promoting and documenting their work. As Jeremy Morris argues through the case example of Imogen Heap, even industry-established artists are increasingly forced to 'go it alone' due to the fragility of the proverbial 'record deal' stemming from the changing contemporary economic landscape of music production and distribution – this resulting from the digital turn. As he states, "Music has long been mobile, whether through portable transistor radios, portable cassette players, the trading of mix tapes and the like, but music as a digital file has a fluidity that surpasses previous formats of recorded music". While this has resulted in a historically unprecedented abundance of access to music for your average listener, for the independent musician the equation seems to be "mo' mobility, mo' problems" (R.I.P. Biggie Smalls).

Many thanks to the editors of *Wi* for the opportunity to publish this special edition. Thanks also to the Canadian chapter of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM-Canada) and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for bringing this scholarship together in the first place.

Thank you to the panel of blind peer reviewers for their central role in developing this issue. Thanks also to Tamara Shepherd and Ben Spencer for copy editing, and Antonia Hernández for web layout. Finally, I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to the contributors for their patience and generosity.

"Let the music take control. Let the rhythm move you."

C+C Music Factory, Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now), Columbia Records, 1990.

Montreal, March 1st 2013

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