

Private Listening and the Birth of Modern Soundscape

The aim of this essay is to point out how - and if - the increase of a private dimension of listening has changed the musical practices, in terms of production and reception.

Even if listening is structurally linked to a more intimate and personal aspect of human life, we can not ignore that – from an historical point of view - sound and music has always carried out a very social role. Listening has always played an ambiguous role, being at the same time active and passive, individual and collective. But if paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze it is simple to send the masses to war by way of music, can we do the same with the individual listener?

As Roland Barthes points out the activity of listening is deeply linked to the animal aspect of humankind: sound is a means of communication that informs us about who made it and why, in order to react properly. Understanding the sonic signals safeguards the listener from behaving wrongly in public contexts, where music plays a central role, like celebrations and religious ceremonies. These kind of events are strongly focused on music, contributing in that way to the development of musical mass diffusion.

In Western culture the idea of sound as a social phenomenon, was dominant until the end of World War II, when a new social stratification took place. The European soundscape of the Fifties was characterized by sounds shared and heard collectively, especially in rural and economically non-developed context.

The lack of visual dimension was replaced by collective efforts aimed a sort of “cinematisation” of aural experience, as Rudolf Arnheim points put:

In silent films the deficiency of speech was scarcely noticed, for mere sight already gives a most comprehensive picture of the world. Painting certainly does not make us

think that we are missing the aural, for it is, to a lesser extent than the film, a part of reality. It is very far from the material world, so one does not apply material standards to it. Wireless's sin of omission, on the other hand, is most apparent. The eye alone gives a very complete picture of the world, but the ear alone gives an incomplete one. So at first it is a great temptation for the listener to “supplement” from his own imagination what is “lacking” so obviously in the broadcast.

Media Studies identify this period as the “golden age of radio”. We can indicate two factors for this common use of technical means: firstly, the scarcity of devices due to the post-war poverty, and secondly the live dimension of radio performances.

The lack of sound quality that characterize the early record industry, pushed radio networks to broadcast mainly live music and shows, thus listeners found themselves more in a theatrical situation than in a mediated one. Radio presenters and musicians were of course aware of that, and tried to establish an “interactive” relationship with their audience. A good example is the Italian radio show “Ballate con noi” (Dance with us), broadcasted from 1951 to 1961 with the specific purpose to make the public dance in group, in their own houses.

The musical core of the act was formed by a selection of international dance and entertainment music, while the speakers suggested moving the furniture in order to transform living rooms in dance floors. This rudimentary experiment of “interactive media” shows us how participative was the early post-war soundscape. Yet, simultaneously, the radio laid the foundations for a private musical fruition.

This change was, in fact, propitiated by the technological progress that allowed people to take control of music, manipulating it by means of audio recording and transmission.

As Theodor Adorno indicated during his activity as a member of the Radio research project, the radio culture of the Thirties generated two phenomena: the idea that music could be cut and de-contextualized and the birth of the audiophile. These two aspects are strongly linked and represent the first step to the creation of a secluded and private soundscape. The audiophile is a particular kind of listener whose close connection with the audio technology is – for Adorno – more focused on the means

rather than on the music.

The audiophile's practical *expertise* is opposed to the structural listening which is the only effective way to approach the musical experience. Adorno - with his negative reaction to the disjointed listening – personify the distance between the old European culture and the raising of the American amusement industry. Because of the political situation and the cultural legacy it was born into, the European communication system was more oriented toward the propaganda and the transmission of musical tradition rather than the entertainment.

We can say that the musical market is re-imported from the US to Europe, where it was born during the early Seventeen Century, that is different is the new technological paradigm that make music liquid and pervasive. Nowadays we do not buy musical events anymore, but music particles in form of stream of datas. In this perspective tracing the history of commodification of sound is equivalent to analysing the process of soundscape privatisation.

The climax of this process is nowadays reached by the diffusion – on a large scale – of portable musical players and headphones, which have developed the need for a customized and secluded sound experience. But where and when was this extreme intimacy between sound and listener developed? Jonathan Sterne in his *The Audible Past* affirms that the first categories exposed to the private dimension of listening by headphones, were doctors and telegraphist.

Working with listening generate a series of capacity that Sterne calls *audile technique*:

audile technique grew up with the modern *bourgeoisie*, and was developed in circumscribed professional domains of middle-class. Medicine and telegraphy were two fields where techniques of listening provided professional ethos and prestige.

Medicine and telegraphy were middle class professions, embodying the main values of modernity as rationality and efficiency. Medical stethoscopic auscultation was linked to scientific reason; sound telegraphy was linked to bureaucratic reason. Private listening became an entertainment activity only recently, at its origins it was

a tool of rationality. The today's urban traveller who prefers his own soundtrack to everyday sounds is the contemporary version of early middle class *audile technique's* mastery.

The idealization of technical hearing equates nowadays the immersion in an inner emotional experience. This experience is reinforced by the binaural stereo image that plunges the user of headphones into creating a new space: a personal *stereo image*. The combination of *audile technique* and sound technology reshape the acoustic space. What popularized the private listening was music.

In this perspective we can say that the music consumer is the ultimate degree of *audile techniques* coinciding with the sonic private property. This private property involves both musical matter and space. From its very beginning musical industry emphasized the importance of a secluded space in order to have a “personal” experience of music. This space was the private middle-class house that was imagined as a quiet oasis. As Peter Sloterdijk points out in his trilogy *Spheres*, in the contemporary society everyone carries out their own “bourgeois house” even in public spaces, thus contributing to the consolidation of a “comfort era”.

According to this idea, soundscape can be imagined as a set of walking sonic bubbles, custodians of a private portable musical experience. Although several researches have been addressed to the relationship between the listener and the public space, only a few are musicologically oriented. Has this technological nomadism created an equivalent musical nomadism? The question raises an ambiguous answer, because of the contemporary condition of musical technology that is both an instrument of liberation and slavery from musical industry.

Our soundscape is the result of this tension between the need of an individual experience and the economic push to the massification, that are both realized through headphones. It is interesting to remark how this struggle does not involve the musical matter. Headphones are not dedicated to a specific musical genre and no musical genre is specifically dedicated to headphones listening. This is probably because the sonic parameters that headphones can strengthen – such as spatialization and timber richness – are not primary on the music production agenda.

But the use of headphones is not only linked to the private fruition: in the last fifteen years the phenomenon of the “headphones concert” has continuously increased. Born in 1999 the headphones concert is a musical performance experienced only through headphones. The aim is to create a high degree of intimacy with sound, with no distractions or other sound intrusion.

The first performance was executed by the psychedelic American band The Flaming Lips, and the more recent and important performance was the “Space Cadet Headphones Tour” carried out by the Canadian dj Kid Koala with a strong emphasis placed on relax and music immersion. This paradoxical process of sharing music being secluded from the rest of the audience is realized by a different proxemics, more warm and friendly.

Another interesting attempt to break the boundaries among isolated listeners are Ipod bars. As Michael Bull points out in his “Sounding out the City”, Ipod users consider themselves as part of a dynamic acoustic community, characterized by an active approach to their mp3s, organized and recombined in personal playlists. During Ipod nights people are invited to share their own playlists, plugging their Ipods directly to the loudspeaker system.

Replacing a professional dj with the generic listener places all the listeners on the same level, creating a shared soundscape made by personal – or even shuffled – music selection. As Ian Chambers suggests the combination mp3 players/headphones encourages an aggressively private experience. In this perspective we may consider our soundscape as a sonic battlefield with a rich series of implications on the social and even political levels:

The Walkman is therefore a political act? It is certainly an act that unconsciously entwines with many other micro-activities in conferring different sense of *polis*. In producing a different sense of space and time, it participates in rewriting the conditions of representation: where “representation” clearly indicates both the semiotic dimensions of the everyday and potential participation in a political community.

This participation involves both men and women. This gender specification is not

banal, speaking of audio technology, since the audiophile world is strongly male-oriented in terms of marketing and communication. Hi-fi has always been considered as a matter of power, therefore something for the white middle-class man. The image that the hi-fi culture has of women is well exemplified by the notion of “Wife Acceptance Factor”. Paolo Magaudda explains that the Waf is used by audiophiles as an instrument for measuring size and power of hi-fi devices in order to buy or build a loudspeaker system admissible for their wives.

This strong separation between genders is not true in the case of headphones listening which on the contrary is really mixed and equally balanced.

In conclusion we can remark that the traditional idea of soundscape – as theorized by R. Murray Schafer – has undergone several modifications, mainly because it is more and more difficult to define it as a collective composition. Private listening challenges every previous musical paradigm, redefining the role of the composer, of the music industry and of the listener. Circumscribing our analysis to the Western culture we can say that our soundscape is more and more characterized by the need of a private experience.

Today's sonic sphere is more dynamic than that of the early World Soundscape Project, yet we cannot hear it properly because we are covered by headphones. Schafer's division in Sound Event, Sound Signal and Keynote Sound needs a significant revision in order to describe the dimension of private listening. Although a large array of studies have been dedicated to this, they have ignored the fact that private listening is an element of the soundscape, rather than a simple escape from it.

Abandoning every simplistic dichotomy between a good attentive listener and a secluded one, we should expand the study of the private listening dimension as an active force in the shaping of contemporary soundscape.

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ABSTRACT

Private Listening and the Birth of the Modern Soundscape

Since the end of World War II the collective consumption of music has decreased, changing in a radical way the soundscape. The sound of radio and recorded music is always more addressed to a non-homogeneous community of customers, propitiating the idea that the acoustic space can be personally manipulated and possessed.

The apex of this process is nowadays reached by the diffusion - on a large scale - of portable musical players and headphones which have developed the need for a customised and secluded soundscape. In this paper we will analyse the private dimension of listening realized through the use of headphones, and its implications from an historical and communicational perspective.

Note on author

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