

Personal Reflections: Frances Wilkins

Bells:

Church bells can often be heard in many of the field recordings we made as part of the overall soundscape of the city. Over the time I lived in Rostock I realised how important the sounds of church bells were to the sonic environment. What did they tell me about Rostock? They signified that this is predominately a Christian city, it is a reminder that Christianity is alive and supported in the city, and on a more practical note it shows that there are a number of fully functioning clocks and bell towers among Rostock's churches, some of which must have bell ringing groups linked to them.

Hi-Fi and Lo-Fi soundscapes

Walking through some areas of the city there was a distinct difference between places where there were loud lo-fi sounds, and places where they were very quiet. In the places where lo-fi noise was at a minimum, it was amazing how many sounds could be heard that were otherwise obscured. This was particularly noticeable when we went from the inside the central train station where there was no sign of traffic and noise was very low for much of the time, to the main road outside the building. Inside the station the sounds that could be heard were very clear and distinctive, hi-fi sounds where the subtleties could be heard. But once outside the station the constant sound of traffic obscured any other sounds that might otherwise be heard. All the sounds melded into each other, and there was constant loud background noise which covered up all anything that might have been heard if the cars had not been there such as birdsong or footsteps. It was disturbing to think that so many of nature's sounds are lost in the sounds that human beings make.

When I closed my eyes during recording, many sounds became much more interesting and I started to picture what I thought might be their sources. However, I noticed many indistinct sounds. Sounds which had no obvious sources but which constituted an underlying blanket of noise. Perhaps this is an aspect of modern life which we cannot no longer escape from - refrigerators, air conditioning, traffic, computers. Barbara Alge spoke about the sounds she recalls when she lived in a rural Brazilian community in 2010 such as barking dogs and chickens, but in Rostock today there are many noises which are completely unrecognizable and which obscure the sounds that people might have heard before. When I notice the sounds they wear me down and make me tired and irritable as I cannot do anything about them. It would be interesting to know what kind of psychological effects they have on people.

Pointless Sounds

Standing just inside the doors of a shopping mall I noticed a very quiet indistinct sound of piped music coming from a speaking close to me. I couldn't hear the music clearly above the lo-fi noise coming from shops and shoppers, and I found the music pointless as it did not seem to serve any function.

Sounds which sound like something else

Sometimes I found sounds which sounded like something else. On one day in mid-December, when there was thick snow on the ground and the temperature was a few degrees below freezing, we were walking along Fahrstraße, a street in Gehlsdorf. As I walked past an electricity box next to the road, I was struck by a sound coming from inside it. It appeared to have an almost identical sound to that which a cricket or grasshopper makes on a summer evening in a hot country. The fact that we were in Rostock in the depth of winter made the sound seem comical.

On another occasion, we were recording the sound of books being taken out of the university library. The sound of the scanners at the issue desk sounded surprisingly similar to those found in supermarkets.

Street Musicians

It was interesting to discover that most of the buskers who we recorded were not from Rostock but were travelling musicians from the Eastern part of Europe - namely Latvia and Slovakia. To me this was a reminder that we were in the Eastern part of Germany, and that the connections were mostly with the East of Europe, not with other parts of the world.

Street musicians were often performing British popular music, particularly from the 1980s, and while this was interesting I also found it quite disappointing. I was hoping to hear German traditional or popular music or Eastern European folk tunes, but these were rarer. I was reminded of time spent in Krakow in 2004-2005 when popular British and American music from the 1980s was at its height of popularity on the radio and in the bars and clubs. People in Krakow had embraced the style of music, and this was also evident among some of the musicians we encountered in Rostock. The British pop group Queen were particularly popular, and I heard interpretations of their music on a number of occasions while walking in the centre of Rostock. Only the Roma musicians were met played music from their culture. They were a group of three men performing on the main shopping street on keyboard, accordion, and tambourine, and sang upbeat harmonised songs from what sounded like the Roma folk tradition, the keyboard sounding out through a battered amplifier.

The reaction of the shoppers to the buskers was, in my opinion, positive. While they did not outwardly show that they were interested in the music - people did not stand around and watch, and did not speak to the musicians - they showed their appreciation through giving the buskers coins, and compared to the British Isles, where it is very difficult to make a living from busking, it appeared that the job was more lucrative as passers-by were more open to the musicians.

Overlapping Sounds

The first recording I made together with Barbara Alge was interesting because it captured not just one sound but many overlapping sounds which could be heard together such as birds, bicycles, car engines, music, and walkers. What I found especially interesting was that the main actions in the scene were not necessarily reflected in the main sounds captured in the recording of the scene, and thus the soundscape was noticeably different to the visual representation of the scene. For example, when we recorded the sound of a flag creaking, the main visual action was a man standing at a cigarette machine close to the flags and attempting to pay for a packet of cigarettes with a note which the machine would continually refuse to accept. However, the man's actions went unnoticed in the audio recording as they were almost silent to the listener.

Same Sounds, Different Listening Experience

Something which struck me when doing joint fieldwork with Barbara Alge was the listening experience, and the differences between two individuals recording the same sound. For example, when we were recording in the Stadthafen I noticed that while Barbara consistently tuned into the sounds of bells (often I had failed to notice these), I would notice other sounds which she had not realised were there. While the reason for this was sometimes that we were looking in different directions and thus noticing the sounds made by the activities taking place within our vision, this was not always the case, and sometimes distant sounds were left outside the awareness of one of us. This showed us what a different listening experience one person can have to another person standing in the same place. Deep listening exercises can only lead to enhance the sonic experiences of people.

Unexpected Sounds

It was interesting that when recording the sonic environment there were often sounds coming from places and objects which we did not expect to make a noise, and some activities which were taking place made no sound at all, although within the visual environment they sometimes constituted the greatest activity at the time. In the Stadthafen, for example, we recorded the sound of a flag which was consistently creaking, and this was the most distinct sound in that place at that time. However,

when we looked at the scene the most noticeable activity was a person standing at a cigarette machine nearby buying some cigarettes. All the action of the person putting money in the cigarette machine (which he did a number of times as it was not functioning properly) was completely missing from the recording because, while it was visually interesting, it was completely silent. The flag, however, which moved only slightly in reality, dominated the sonic environment at that time. There was nothing audible coming from the cigarette machine but a lot of noise from the flag. This was interesting visually and aurally, because you might walk past and see the person at the cigarette machine but you would probably not even notice the flag. Aurally, however, you would experience the flag but no cigarette machine.

Self-Awareness

Becoming aware of ourselves was a process we went through as we recorded more sounds. It was so easy at the beginning to speak or cough during recordings because we had forgotten that our presence in the sonic environment could impact the recording. Self-awareness was something that we needed to train ourselves in - to be quiet and to listen.

Potential for Narrative

During one recording session in the Stadthafen I started to think that the potential for narrative alongside the sounds recorded could be worth exploring. For example, as we were recording I saw and heard a man who was tidying up on his sailing boat which was tied up to one of the pontoons. He came out of his cabin into the cockpit and closed the door of the cabin. He then stepped off his boat and walked away from the pontoons to his bicycle. He then cycled past us and away along the harbourside. Everything could be heard on the recording, and the idea that this could be turned into a section of a story seemed like an idea worth exploring: narrative alongside sound, and sound telling a story.

Sounding Cold

Some sounds can really tell you something about the weather at the time. While Barbara Alge and I stood in the Universitätsplatz at the height of the Christmas market in temperature which must have been in the region of -6°C , we noticed a woman standing among the crowd busking on her recorder. She looked very poor, and she had no money in the tin which she had placed in front of her. It was bitterly cold, and that was reflected in her recorder playing because you could hear her shivering as she played. You could actually hear the cold through the music which she played.

Rain and the Sound of the Thaw

During individual fieldwork I recorded both the sounds of rainfall and the sounds of thawing snow and ice. On one occasion I was walking near my apartment on Ferdinandstraße in the pouring rain. Rain on its own I found of little interest to Rostock's sound identity, but this had a definitive sound because the rain was falling on a lead windowsill and this combination of surfaces resulted in a distinctive sound which I was not familiar with. I took out my recorder immediately and started to record, and while I captured some of the sound the recording became dominated by the sound of rainfall on the umbrella. On another occasion on New Years Day 2011, after a month of heavy snowfall and temperatures down to -14° Celsius at times, we experienced the start of a thaw, and on that day I was out walking with my partner in the vicinity of my apartment. We went down to a nearby railway bridge across the river, and although the water was still frozen and there was thick snow around us, the thaw was noticeable all around us. As we stood next to the bridge we heard heavy dripping of water coming from the thawing snow and ice of the railway bridge. It was falling onto ice in the river, and dominated the sound environment. The sound of birds in the distance and a person nearby working on the outside of their chalet added to the atmosphere of thawing and the anticipation of an early spring. Later on the same walk, we chanced upon a large disused workshop for railway carriages. It had been abandoned for many years, and many of the windows had been broken. Inside the building there was near silence except for a distinct high-pitched sound, almost

like a very short bleep from a piece of hospital machinery. It took a while to find the source of the sound. I was surprised to find that the sound was actually the noise being made by dripping water (again, the thaw in action) hitting a piece of glass on the ground of the building. Not only did the sound signify the environmental behaviour on that day, but also the fact that we were in a derelict building, windows smashed. Outside the building another sound of the thaw - torrents of water falling from the roof sounding like a tap which has been permanently left turned on. Again I recorded the sound, and while in the foreground this relentless waterfall was heard, in the background there was the more distinct, hi-fi tone of the water drop landing on glass.

Reflections on Individual Fieldwork in Contrast to Group and Joint Fieldwork

Whereas our approach to group fieldwork was structured in the sense that we dedicated an amount of time solely for data collection, individual fieldwork was much more spontaneous. Living between the Bahnhofsviertel and the Altstadt I was often struck by an interesting sound in the vicinity of my apartment, and on hearing it I would take my recorder and record from my windowsill or just outside my front door. At one time I was woken at 6am by the sound of the recycling lorry collecting glass from a nearby bottle bank. On another occasion, on Christmas Eve, the neighbourhood was filled with the sounds of bells chiming, summoning people to services throughout the city. I opened the window of the apartment and immediately started recording. On other occasions I took walks throughout the city around the Bahnhofsviertel, in Lindenpark, Lütten Klein, the City Centre, and across the river to Dierkow and Gehlsdorf. From the early days of the project I took to carrying my Zoom recorder with me while I walked around in the city, and later on walks in the suburban areas. While I was not always analysing my situation in terms of sonic interest, I jumped on opportunities to record as they appeared, and this led to some interesting sound discoveries including political rallies, public transport, street music (both pre-recorded and live), and natural sounds such as rainfall and birdsong.

The Weihnachtsmarkt and Rostock's City Soundscape

The Weihnachtsmarkt not only dominated Rostock's visual scape during the month of December, it also had a profound impact on the soundscape of the city during that time. I noticed this particularly when I was recording sound across the Stadthafen from the city centre, in the district of Gehlsdorf. Standing next to the water I could hear the sounds of nature, dogs parking, and people walking (and talking) close by. However, even though we were some distance away from the city centre, the distant sound of the fairground of the Weihnachtsmarkt was distinctive and aurally dominant.

The Importance of Language and Dialect in Rostock's Soundscape

Language and dialect is one of the most important defining features of the soundscape of any locality. In the British Isles, it is possible sometimes to tell a villager just by the sound of their dialect or accent, and accents can change within the space of only a few miles. Having recordings of people speaking has been one of the most important ways of defining Rostock's city identity through sound.