

METHODOLOGY

‘Our methodology can be described as “being set up by doing” – and if we would not have opted for this methodology we would have probably missed many interesting subtle sounds.’

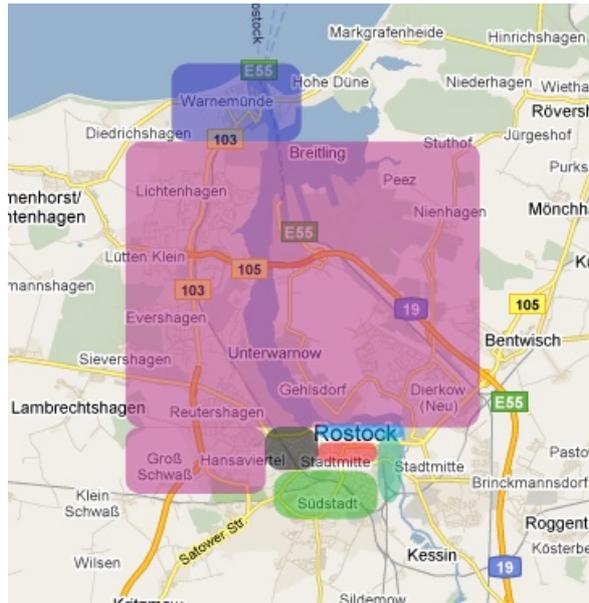
Barbara Alge, Jan 2011

While we initially referred to ethnomusicological models such as those developed by Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley¹, and Bruce Jackson², we soon realised that our research methods needed to be re-adjusted to suit our particular situation. Because of this, our research methodology developed as our project progressed, and as this was not the standard ethnomusicological research project - for a start, most of the sounds lack any obvious performer or performance context and were spontaneous, or ‘of the moment’, some forms of documentation took precedence over others. For example, while ethnovideography, audio recording, and photography, were the most important fieldwork techniques, interviews with people and pre-organised meetings with musical performers were considered unnecessary.

When we began the project, one of the first things we did was establish a methodological approach to surveying the sounds of the city. We decided to divide the city into districts based on the already long-established ‘quarters’ of the city (in actuality there are many more than four of these localities). We then treated each district as a separate sonic environment, and during fieldwork we would concentrate on no more than three districts at any one time. We decided on the following divisions which can be seen on the map below: Stadthafen, Altstadt, Zentrum, KTV, Südstadt, Warnemünde, and a generalised grouping called ‘The Suburbs’ (encompassing Lütten Klein, Groß Klein, Evershagen, Reutershagen, Gehlsdorf, and Dierkow).

¹ Barz, Gregory and Timothy Cooley, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

² Jackson, Bruce, *Fieldwork* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).



Making divisions in Rostock's sonic environment

Choosing Sounds

Methodological Reflections from Frances Wilkins

Ideas for our methodological approach were gleaned from the writing of R. Murray Schafer³, particular his reflections on hi- and lo-fi sounds. A hi-fi soundscape is described by Schafer as 'one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level', discrete sounds being those which are distinct to the listener, and include musical melodies, birdsong, and clock bells. A lo-fi soundscape in contrast has an 'overdense population of sounds', background noises which obscure the ability to hear hi-fi signals. Lo-fi sounds include the hum of traffic, refrigerators, and air conditioning - sounds which were mostly useless to us in terms of sound identity (they are essentially background noise which cannot be placed), but gave us an insight into the noise levels experienced by people in different environments and gave cause for reflection on the impact of these noise levels on people living in that environment (please see personal reflections for more insight into this). It was important for us to realise the difference between hi-fi and lo-fi sounds as we walked around the city and made choices about whether what we were hearing was of interest to us or whether we could leave it unrecorded.

The researcher in this type of fieldwork is embarking on a 'Soundwalk' as they explore the city. The sound walks, as described by Schafer, is 'an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score as a guide. The score is a map, drawing the listener's attention to unusual sounds and ambiances to be heard along the way.' As we walked through each district listening to the sound environments, we kept open to all sounds but were drawn to those which reflected the immediate environment in some way.

³ Schafer, Raymond Murray, *Our Sonic Environment and the Soundscape: The Tuning of the World* (Destiny Books: 1993)

Methodological Reflections from Barbara Alge

Apart from the directed recordings of staged musical performances (Duo Ossenkopp and Breitling shanty choir), we did not plan which sounds to record before doing our sound walks. Of course we departed from certain expectations concerning sounds at certain places, but they often turned out to be completely different from what we had expected. We walked and tried to speak the least to each other in order to be able to listen to the environment. When identifying interesting sounds such as what was coming from a boat at the harbour on 11 November 2010, what sometimes happened was that we switched on the recorder and the sound stopped. It was important to be patient and to wait, because suddenly at unexpected moments a certain sound was repeated.

A person who we would have liked to record was an old man who is known as “Rostocker Original” because he plays the accordion on Kröpeliner Straße the whole year round and is part of the visual and audio cityscape. It was exactly him we expected to always be there playing the accordion when we returned to the centre after recording elsewhere – but three times it happened that only his empty chair was left when we came back. He was difficult to pin down, and when we finally had the chance to speak to him and ask him if we could record him, he told us that he did not want us to record him.

Recording Sounds

A windshield was essential for all outside audio recordings, and occasionally even this did not completely protect the microphones from wind noises which can occasionally be heard on the recordings. Video was recorded either at the same time as the audio or directly afterwards, as was photography. Sometimes when we conducted fieldwork, especially when working alone, we did not have all our equipment to hand, and in these cases (as you will see on the sound map), visual material is sometimes missing.



Barbara Alge recording, 13 November 2010 (photo: FW)

As often as possible we kept audio recordings between 1:30 and 2 minutes in length. As you will discover on the Soundmap on this website, when you click on each audio example you will hear a 30 seconds clip, but if you decide to download the sound, that clip will be extended to as long as two minutes. This is for practical reasons in order to keep the loading time on the website to a minimum, but allows you to hear an extended version of the audio if you choose to download.

Our personal impressions were recorded after we captured each sound recording, and these have been used to develop our ideas related to the 'Soundscapes Rostock' project. Some of them can be read at the end of the 'Theoretical Reflections' part of this website. Here, we have made observations about the sounds and the environment, including anything we encountered which challenged our pre-conceptions.

Ethical Considerations

When sounds involved people, especially if they were performing music or creating sounds alone or in small groups (such as street workers and labourers), we always asked permission to record them. When these people were musicians, we showed them a permission form and asked them to sign it in order to confirm that they agreed to us recording them. Unfortunately there were a few times when this was not possible, and there are a few recordings on the website where we have been unable to find and credit the people involved in creating the music. **If you recognise any of the music as performed by yourself, or by someone you know, please contact us and let us know who you are so that we can credit as appropriate!**

Cataloguing Sounds

Keeping a note of where each recording was made, the time of day, and the sounds which could be heard on the recording, was vitally important. We did not want to be in a position where we had numerous recordings but no certain way to identify exactly when and where they were recorded. In order to avoid this, we re-named all the audio, image, and video files immediately after recording, and wrote short descriptions to accompany each sound.

Sounds were described in a protocol which summarised each place visited during fieldwork, the recordings made, the equipment used, and an identification of the exact sounds to be heard on each recording. Each sound file which was to be included in the exhibition and website was entered into a database where information was written down including date, area of the city, exact location, short description, additional notes, accompanying video and photograph if available, and equipment used. All this information was written to accompany the recordings on the Soundmap area of the website. Audio cutting to 2 minutes and 30 seconds were done for each file, each of which was converted to MP3 for the website.

Publication of the material has been partly inspired by the video annotation work which both myself and Barbara Alge did for the Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis (EVIA) Digital Archive Project, based at Indiana University.⁴ For this project we analysed in detail the ethnovideography from our PhD research projects, which will soon be published online. While EVIA was concerned only with field videography, the Soundscapes project is concerned with three forms of media combined - videography, photography, and audio recording - with accompanying explanatory texts.

Frances Wilkins

⁴ www.eviada.org, last access 25.01.2011