

The Acoustic Environment as a Public Domain

by Henrik Karlsson

Paper presented at “Sound Escape”—International Conference on Acoustic Ecology, Trent University, Peterborough, Canada, June 28 - July 2, 2000

Scene I: 1898, French countryside

The poets Mallarmé and Valéry are out walking in the country. They pass by a field of golden wheat and Valéry, who knows nothing of agriculture, asks Mallarmé “what kind of grass” it is. Mallarmé replies: “But my dear fellow, it’s wheat.” [Mais, mon cher, c’est du blé] After a while, evidently with the approaching Parisian concert season in mind, he adds: “It’s autumn’s first clash of cymbals” [C’est le premier coup de cymbales de l’automne].

Scene II: 1998, Copenhagen

A World Health Organisation (WHO) official prophesies that, barring major national disasters, mankind will be able to cope with and geographically contain future threats to the environment. But there are two exceptions, two phenomena which are tending to get out of control and to increase exponentially: allergies and noise.

Although I am not very fond of talking about noise only, and definitely do not equate soundscape with noise, questions concerning noise can serve as a *pars pro toto*, for it is through noise that people generally first become aware of the soundscape. Noise, properly used, is a good pedagogical way into the subject.

Summing up what has happened in the soundscape context internationally over the past seven years, since the memorable Banff conference of 1993, isn’t easy. My impression is that concern for a better acoustic environment has grown and is more widespread than before, with more conferences, more websites and artistic projects, more books. And yet—very few concrete results, at both national and international levels. We meet and present our new projects in yet another show-and-tell happening. This conference is no exception. The principal players are much the same as in 1993.

We are still more or less marking time. Is the reason to be found in the world around us or within ourselves?

I would like now to concentrate on a number of barriers, which prevent us from achieving visible results. What we have to do is to devise strategies for winning allies *within* these areas or, quite simply, break down the barriers in order to go further.

1. The political barrier

Noise questions do not have high priority among environmentalists or politicians, nor within national bureaucracies or environmental organisations like Greenpeace. Neither has noise been “part of an integrated urban strategy” (EU Commissioner Ritt Bjerregaard, 1998).¹ In fact, the acoustic environment has roughly the same low status in environmental policy as cultural affairs in a government or

local authority. Why is it that noise problems are increasing and apparently getting out of control?

There are several reasons for this:

(1) *Noise is not regarded as a serious health problem.* It does not figure on the health agenda, which may seem odd. This is due to noise being regarded primarily as a *physical* problem, to be dealt with on the local level. Consequently noise never rates a specific mention when the European Science Foundation (ESF), the EU and the WHO are listing the most acute health problems in a global perspective.²

Still, the negative impact of noise on health has been amply documented for several decades past.

Instead of repeating the known effects, I can refer to the WHO’s “Guidelines for Community Noise”, which can be downloaded from the WHO home page <www.who.int/peh/noise/noiseindex.html>.

Another field has been added recently, namely a leisure consumption which is tending to become a new occupational injury. *The sound level at concerts*—and not just pop music and discos—has become so high that both musicians and listeners are liable to sustain temporary or permanent hearing damage. We are approaching the absurd situation where it is considered normal or at least expected that both audience and musicians should wear yellow ear plugs for protection.

By way of comparison, this is really the same thing as looking at art or seeing a film through sunglasses!

(2) In contrast to this paralysis, inaction or rigidity characterising law and administration, we have *the citizens’ perception of sound and noise*. If you raise this subject, no matter to whom you are talking, the odds are that before long they will mention some sound that they can’t stand. Dealing with noise problems for real would be like opening a Pandora’s box, which may be the real reason why politicians dare not or cannot address these issues. (In fact, it affects every citizen).

(3) Lastly, noise abatement always means *collisions with economic interests*.

I shall be returning to this point later.

We must:

- adhere to a wider definition of sound, noise and silence than is represented both by the anti-noise organisations on the one hand and the music community on the other,
- increase our numbers within more powerful pressure groups,
- work for changes locally and gradually build up networks with other localities, regions and nations.

2. The bureaucratic barrier

Present-day management of the acoustic environment is based on *fragmented, inchoate legislation* emanating from a pre-electronic acoustic world which is receding further and further into the past. Legislation is not keeping up with technology.

In a word, there is no holistic view or overarching system for dealing with questions of the acoustic environment. When a new sound or new nuisances crop up, a new statutory provision is provisionally arranged—a new desk drawer is opened, or a new reel of red tape unwound. In Sweden as in many other countries, some 20 different authorities are responsible for different parts of the soundscape, and the rules are a labyrinth to citizens and civil servants alike. France, to the best of my knowledge, is the only country with a national acoustic environment council (*Conseil national du bruit* in Paris).

Sound and noise cannot be treated in the same way as geographically limited, physical environmental hazards if they are viewed from the standpoint of the individual citizen and not in the perspective of bureaucracy.

Presently I will have my own proposal to make for a new approach.

3. The economic barrier

How can we accept such a state of affairs? One explanation is that sounds are accessories in social interaction connected with territory, power and economics. Ultimately, noise problems are always a matter of *who controls a certain area, who can assume the right to probe or exceed geographic limits, and who can afford to pay*. There are very powerful economic interests involved here—not only local and national ones but also transnational corporations like the aviation, transport and tourist industries.

Some concrete examples, from mischief to economic imperialism:

1. Toy shops are stocking more and more products which generate sound, not mechanically, like the old-time rattle, but electronically. Often the sound levels are inoffensive. But there are also telephones for girls and machine guns for boys which can be downright harmful. In a test of five cap-pistols, all five had a detonation of 140 dB (C) or more at a distance of 50 cm from the ear. If children foolishly fire a pistol like this still closer to someone's ear, the bang corresponds to 162 dB (C), which is the same sound level as a real Mauser.³
2. A Frenchman riding a motorbike with no silencer straight through Paris at 3 o'clock in the morning can wake 250,000 sleeping people.⁴ What power! With my machine I can control a quarter of a million people. I'm the boss.
3. In many countries, aerial advertising is permitted in the form of banners flown from aircraft circulating at the minimum permissible altitude. This is relatively harmless, because the aircraft keeps moving. But what does it feel like if instead the advertising firm uses a helicopter or an airship which hovers, for example, over a football pitch or a concert platform where people have paid money to listen to something else and now have to put up with engine noise for hours on end?
4. The market economy features a massive trial of strength between the public and private sectors. Stockholm business interests are demanding a new airport very close to Stockholm and threat-

ening otherwise to transfer their offices to London. In the country at large, local firms are demanding that jet aircraft still be permitted to land at the nearest airport after 11 at night. This would mean thousands of people being woken up or having their sleep disturbed every night in order for a handful of executives to get home to bed from a business trip to the capital.

5. The skiing resorts of the Alps and the Nordic countries are attractive, not only for sport and amusement but also for tranquillity and silence. But the demand for economic gain and entertainment is nibbling at the edges of these silent areas. In order, for example, for a helicopter rescue crew to be kept on standby, the pilots have to be able to make extra money by flying tourists to the mountain peaks so that they do not have to use the ski lift. Result: day-long helicopter noise.
6. Everyone predicts a huge expansion of air traffic in the next few decades. Most of the big airports in the centre of Europe have already hit the ceiling, but there is great pressure from package tour companies and the tourist industry to increase the number of flights. How can this be resolved?

Basically there are three ways of expanding air traffic:

- (1) by building new runways (or new airports),
- (2) by building bigger aircraft,
- (3) by permitting air traffic at night.

All three alternatives, inevitably, mean *more noise* for local residents!

- What local authorities, private individuals and organisations have the power to resist transnational corporations with high funding resources for lobbying?
- What local authority doesn't want to receive tourists?
- What local authority wants to oppose business interests?

An inevitable and annoying question must sooner or later be raised: for how long can an uncontrolled expansion of air traffic and tourism be accepted from an ecological point of view, an expansion which basically is due to more and more people being rich enough to spend their holidays and leisure time on other continents?

More and more, the acoustic environment is becoming a question of power, and of money with which to buy silence. More and more it is becoming a matter of luxury consumption, perverted forms of which also afflict the poor. In the big cities of Central Europe, the areas located nearest to railway lines and motorways are inhabited by the poorest—immigrants and dropouts—because the noise there makes flats less attractive and, consequently, cheaper.

Compare this with the declaration adopted by all member countries of WHO: "*We recognize that the improvement of the health and well-being of people is the ultimate aim of social and economic development.*"

That's what it says. *Not*: that the aim of economic development is to make the rich even richer, so that they can ruin the health of the poor without let or hindrance—which, *de facto*, is what is still happening. All over the world.

Last of all, the big opponents to a healthy acoustic environment are not individual citizens or even individual nations but neo-liberalism as an ideology and the globalisation of the economy. Capital moves where the profits are biggest and where the environmental stipulations are lowest and cheapest.

4. The educational barrier

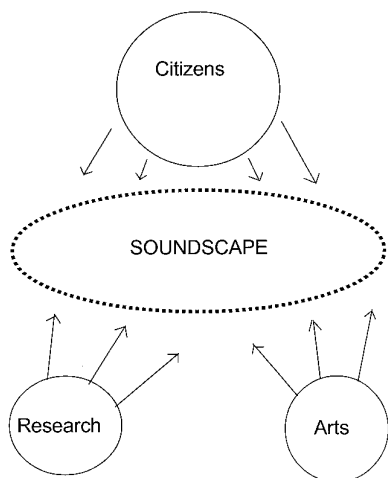


Figure 1

Figures 1 and 2 above show a simplified model of the principal players—leaving aside the politicians for the moment. In not one single country is there one big pressure group for a better acoustic environment. Researchers and artists do what they can in their several fields, but they often lack the common touch and are not always good teachers.

What is needed is help from information, educational and media experts—dedicated writers, journalists, broadcasters and teachers who can combine research with artistic forms of presentation and modern information technology.

In our circles there is an optimistic belief that art and science can cross-pollinate each other to the general good. Sometimes they do, but often what occurs is an encounter between representatives of two highly ego-tripping sectors, neither of them very interested in pedagogics.

5. The academic barrier

For a long time now, at least 20 different disciplines have been occupying themselves, directly or indirectly, with acoustic environments (Figure 3, next page). In each discipline, as we know, significant research findings have been achieved, but those findings are seldom spread beyond the confines of the discipline or profession concerned. Methodology and theory are not compatible even between closely related disciplines. The pieces of the jigsaw won't fit together, and there is no common pattern either.

In a supremely relevant article, Greg Waggstaff has discussed the relation of acoustic ecology to ecology generally (and, like me, is sceptical of the very term “acoustic ecology”).⁵ He argues that the acoustic ecologists must keep abreast of the latest developments in ecology, which is generally nothing like as “phonocentric” as we like to believe. He also takes issue with a view of things which has been something of a lodestar ever since the World Soundscape Project began, namely that it should be possible to use structures and models from musical compositions to make a society's acoustic environment more balanced and health-giving.

This has also been noted by Alexander Lorenz, in his doctoral thesis “Klangalltag—Alltagsklang”⁶. He maintains that acoustic ecology, judging by its projects, and despite its alleged interdisciplinarity, has been dominated by aesthetic-artistic rather than social scientific

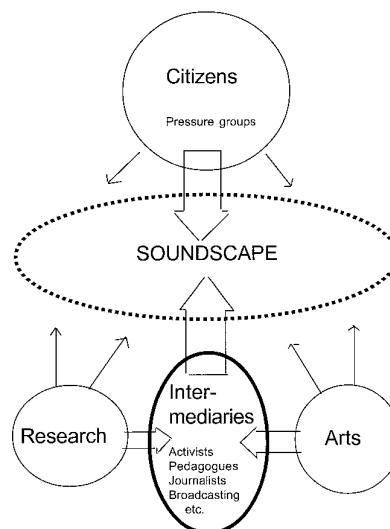


Figure 2

attitudes, and this has impeded a development of theory and methodology. The reason is that it is mainly composers, musicians and pictorial artists who have busied themselves with acoustic themes—and broadcasting producers, one might add.

Almost without exception, the instruments used are of a *qualitative* nature and comprise everything from expert and lay opinions to quasi-experimental field studies, many of them (such as ear-cleaning exercises and soundwalks) aimed at greater sensitising, says Lorenz.

Relations to established sciences such as music psychology and environmental psychology, i.e. those which specifically study the impact of sound on man, have not been looked for, even though they ought to have fruitful synergies to offer. Another aspect of the aesthetic dominance is that the consumers' (or the recipients') perspective is ignored. “The experiencing subject must adopt a bodily, concrete and relevant standpoint. The soundscape, therefore, is not an objectively existing fact but a cultural landscape constituted by human perception”⁷.

Everyone can readily appreciate that this clashes with the main thrust of acoustic ecology hitherto and with most of the projects which have been presented. For there it is the views and aesthetic criteria of the producer that predominate.

In order for acoustic environment research to acquire an academic platform and be accepted as a special field of research, we will have to concern ourselves far more with questions of theory and method. Here as in all new research fields, we will have to be prepared for compact opposition from the established disciplines when they scent competition—just as music sociology, music ethnology and popular music research came in for criticism to begin with.

Some points to bear in mind:

- (1) Instead of a utopian interdisciplinary approach, I believe that a cautiously *multidisciplinary* one is to be preferred. This means, prior to each individual project, agreeing with colleagues on exact topics of inquiry for a concrete assignment and the best pragmatical method, instead of starting off with visionary theoretical models. There are interesting openings to be obtained from

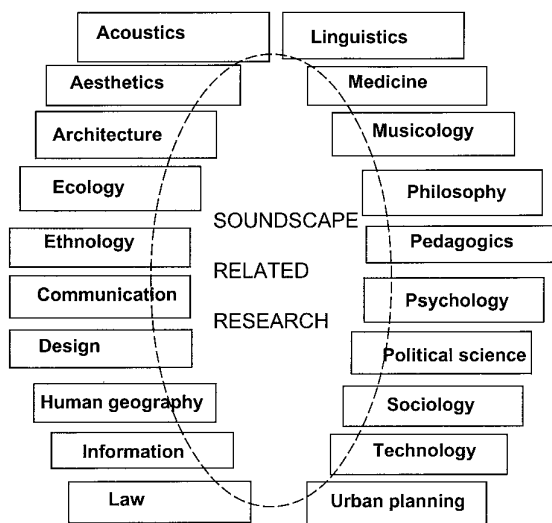


Figure 3

Quality Research and Action Research, which are in the focus of attention at present with a number of new handbooks. We are not yet competent to construct major systems and should thus beware of delving too deeply into ecosophy, semiotics, and philosophy at the present stage of things.

- (2) All research (be it primary research or action research) must be kept separate from educational activities, political actions and artistic presentations. These can *per se* coexist within the same projects, but this is something which the intended sponsors of such arrangements do not understand.
- (3) Clear boundaries need to be drawn in relation to esoterics, nature-romantic fundamentalism and normative aesthetics, as was observed by the philosopher Gernot Böhme⁸. To be frank, all associations with New Age philosophies or religion should be kept private and not hinted at in applications for funding at least.
- (4) In my opinion, the name “acoustic ecology” has shown itself inappropriate and I would like the term to be replaced and the World Forum given a change of name.

4. Conclusion

As a contrast to all technocratic approaches, I would recommend an *anthropocentric model*.

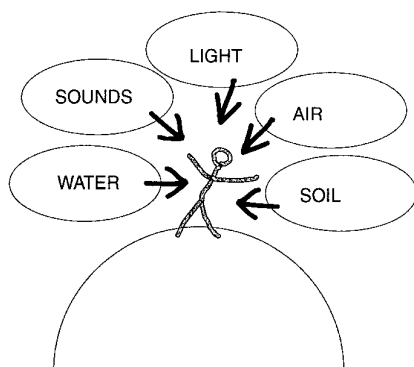


Figure 4

Sound and a good acoustic environment must be equated with a number of other “elements” of vital importance for good and healthy living. Without fresh *air*, uncontaminated *soil*, clean *water* and *light*, there can be no organic life. Even though sounds are of a different, temporary category, the acoustic world should be added as a fifth element of the same dignity.

One of the central ideas in the German philosopher Gernot Böhme’s “ecological aesthetic of nature” is that the human being, in relation to the environment, is primarily, not a rational but a *corporeal* being—we live in and with nature because air, water and soil literally pass through our bodies.⁹ And the same is true of sound! Compare this, once again, with the WHO definition of health: “*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*”

Only with this way of looking at things will a healthy, unspoiled acoustic environment become something of a *common right*—a *public domain*—to which all citizens should have free access, no matter where they live. The acoustic environment will then become something which nobody can sabotage for others or privatise for personal gain. The focus of attention will then be on the individual citizen and his needs, not on product development or other economic interests, whether individual or transnational.

An anthropocentric model of this kind, I am convinced, is the only feasible way of regarding, restoring and preserving the acoustic environment. But this also means that the technocentric model must be abandoned, which has until now dominated legislation, administration and scientific research.

© The Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 2000.
Blasieholmstorg 8, S-111 48 Stockholm/Sweden
Tel. +46-8-407 18 00. Fax. +46-8-611 87 18.

Born in 1940, **Henrik Karlsson** is a musicologist, who graduated from Gothenburg University in 1988 with a thesis on music and nationalism. He is research secretary at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in Stockholm since 1990, and initiator of its extensive soundscape programme, starting with the “Manifesto for a better environment of sound” in 1995.

Notes

1. Ritt Bjerregaard: “The EU’s new noise policy and its relevance to our urban environment”. Speech/98/167 Copenhagen, 7 September 1998.
2. See “Health 21 – health for all in the 21st Century. An introduction to the health for all policy framework for the WHO European Region.” Copenhagen 1998.
3. Tests carried out by The Swedish Consumer Agency in 1998, reported in *Råd & Rön* No. 12, 1998 [Swedish].
4. Fabien Gruhier & Michel de Pracontal: “Le bruit, ennemi public numéro un,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 1727, December 1997.
5. Gregg Wagstaff, “What is acoustic ecology’s ecology?” *Drift*. Three days of sound art + acoustic ecology across Glasgow 12-13-14 November 1999. [Programme book] New Media Scotland, Glasgow 1999 (p. 21-26). Also in *The New Soundscape Newsletter* No. 9, p. 4.
6. Alexander Lorenz: *Klangalltag – Alltagsklang. Evaluation der Schweizer Klanglandschaft anhand einer Repräsentativbefragung der Bevölkerung*. Zentralstelle der Studentenschaft. Zürich 2000.
7. *Ibid*, p. 72.
8. Gernot Böhme: Speech at the symposium “Akustische Ökologie und ökologische Ästhetik,” Wiesbaden June 6th, 1999.
9. Gernot Böhme: *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 14.