

# *Aural (re)locations: Listening to place*

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In recent research, we have sought to understand the reciprocal relationships between music, sound and place, and what this may mean for notions of belonging and community-making. Yet, to investigate this is difficult, because responses to sound – and sound itself – are personal, embodied, transient and difficult to articulate in words. Furthermore, the processes of hearing and listening are understood differently. How to research the sonic qualities of place? And, in our thinking about the interconnections between bodies, place and sound: what is it about the qualities of sound that enables us to inhabit space, to call a place home?

An opportunity arose to explore how sound promotes such connection, and disconnection, when we were invited to undertake a consultancy by the director of the Four Winds Festival, a classical music festival held biannually in the New South Wales coastal town of Bermagui. The director wanted to find out how people responded emotionally to attending this event. Did the festival sounds sustain or enhance an experience of belonging to Bermagui? How we went about this – and the sorts of methodological challenges we negotiated – is discussed here, where we explore the role of sound in place-making, and the significance this has for notions of place-based belonging.

Much work concentrates on the representational aspects of sound, and this framework understands music in terms of a text that is analysed by deconstructing its constituent elements: the song lyrics, rhythm, instrumentation or melodic structures. This approach can tell us a great deal about place-based belonging – music helps forge place-based identifications – but it doesn't really assist us in understanding and articulating the *experiential* processes involved. That is, a focus on what music may represent doesn't really provide us with an understanding of the very ways that sound becomes embodied in idiosyncratic ways. Moreover, and complicating our analysis, the experiential nature of sound is a paradoxical thing; it is transient and ephemeral yet it can have such a profound quotidian impact.

Many researchers have pointed to the different roles sound has within the social realm. Significant to our project is the work of anthropologists Charles Keil and Steven Feld (1994) who suggested that the sound of music has the ability to forge a sense of community through sustaining a feeling of “being in the groove together”. Music therapist Gary Ansdell (2004) advances this argument; the rhythmic, tonal and tactile qualities of the sound of music allow and enable personal and social things “to happen.” Thinking about the potential euphoria of the sound of music in this way is suggestive of shared, social experience (Fiumara 2006). Yet, the sounds of a festival may equally be construed by some as an intrusion, as a disruptive noise that cannot be screened out by a curtain or blind. Hence, listening always occurs *in situ*. Mindful that listening is always spatially and temporally contingent, how do people use sound as a medium to help create a sense of self and belonging in the wider world? This is what we have sought to address in our listening projects. More specifically, we wished to consider *listening*

as a central process in the reciprocal relationships between bodies, place and sound (Smith 2000).

Hearing and listening are understood as quite distinctive practices. Those who are not hearing-impaired have the ability to hear, even when asleep. Listening, however, is a conscious activity: it requires some level of concentration and engagement; it's a process of actively creating and attributing meaning. Hence, the soundscapes of our everyday lives are not passive outcomes of simply hearing sounds. Rather, as Barry Truax (2001) suggested, soundscapes are an outcome of simultaneously encountering, listening, giving meaning to, responding to, and interacting with the silences and rhythmic and tonal qualities of music and sound. Listening operates in emotional, bodily and psychological ways. Yet, these are difficult, slippery things to access. In our project, our focus was on those feelings, sensations and bodily affects that are aroused when engaging with sound, the things actually difficult to articulate in words. (Something that is most often understood as the very function of music, as it enables us to experience emotions precisely because they cannot be expressed by any other medium; Åhlberg 1994; Langer 1942; Wood & Smith 2004). Our specific methodological challenge, then, was to think of sympathetic ways to capture the ephemeral, and make the intangible accessible.

What we decided to use were ‘sound diaries’, a method based on solicited diary methodologies but one that asks participants to explore the more sonic, intuitive and affective aspects of sounds in their social lives (refer also to Duffy & Waitt forthcoming; Waitt & Duffy forthcoming; Wood et al 2007). Each participant was equipped with a digital recorder the size of a mobile telephone, and asked to record those sounds meaningful to them in some way. Our reasoning behind this was that recording such in-the-moment sounds offers a starting point from which to gain insights into how individuals use sonic processes in making corporeal sense of self and place. Moreover, and in light of our research aims, when combined with traditional methods of interview and participant observation, solicited sound dairies offered to help gain access to bodily affects and emotions.

Our request for sound recordings was to be undertaken within two different contexts: that of participants' everyday lives, and while attending the Four Winds Festival. We then asked participants to take part in a conversation quite soon after the recordings, where we talked about what was recorded and why. In this way, we hoped to explore three broad areas of enquiry: how participants understood and classified sound; how sound mobilized their bodies (what they felt, did the sounds make them want to move in certain ways); and any potential connections or relationships felt between the sounds they recorded and the place of Bermagui. We also found that a number of participant's recordings included their own spontaneous bodily and emotional reactions to the sounds they heard, and this was very useful when we started to reflect on the *doing* of sound in these instances.



Blair picnic

Bermagui is a small, coastal town on the east coast of Australia, some 400 kilometres south of Sydney. Its population is characterised by socio-economic diversity, brought about by successive waves of in-migration, from the initial European settlers displacing the Aboriginal people of the Yuin Nation in the late nineteenth century, to the arrival of fishers, loggers and farmers in early twentieth century, and later groups characterised as ‘hippies’ in the 1960s. More recently, Bermagui has redefined itself as a ‘sea-change’ town, with an influx of elderly residents from Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney.

In the sound diaries we gathered and the ensuing conversations, many of the participants in our project revealed themselves to be relatively recent arrivals in Bermagui: examples of this sea- and tree-change phenomenon. And perhaps not surprisingly, when they made their sound dairies of everyday Bermagui, most often what was recorded were sounds of the non-human world; in particular sounds suggestive of untouched and unspoiled Nature. The pounding of the surf driven by the change in tidal patterns, frogs heralding rain, wattlebirds amongst the grevillea, lyrebirds and their clever mimicry – each of these sounds aroused pleasure in some listeners. Our methodology also provided the auditors with self-reflexive opportunities. For example, one participant recorded sounds of the surf not far from where she lived, explaining,

When we moved here [then] I realised what a water person I am. And I think it’s the rhythm of that, [you know], because I probably listen to music less now at home and let that sound of the surf be the background. Because it’s got its own pull about it, and its own sort of life force (conversation SB February 2008).

She went on to further describe what these sounds of nature meant to her, saying that,

It’s a very gentle environment and it is very nourishing and I don’t get any of the nourishing unless I’m in it... And I didn’t really understand *being* in nature before (conversation SB February 2008).

SB infers how the sounds of nature immerse her body, operating for her as a source of nourishment. Other participants recorded similar nature sounds, and spoke of the ways in which these reminded them of a benevolent environment, a world apart from the stresses and strains of modern urban life. These sounds provide a vital clue as to how people make sense of Bermagui as home within an apparently pristine nature.

Not surprisingly, noise was associated with human sounds of traffic and construction. Hence, many also revealed their ongoing concern to protect this place, particularly from property developers who, they felt, were attempting to remake Bermagui as a scaled-down form of the city. For instance KW explained,

You’re either coming here because you like the tranquillity and the lifestyle of Bermagui [and] a bit laid back, but beautiful all the same and unspoilt, or you get back into the rat race of the city where there’s all the noise and the pollution and everything else (conversation March 2008).

Upon further contemplation, participants suggested that these sounds also raise much more nuanced and entangled connections between nature and their individual personal lives. One such example is heard in the following exchange between husband and wife, DW and KW, who, when asked to reflect upon the sounds of Bermagui, talked about the sounds of birds;

KW: If you really want to find out what a place is like, get up before the sparrow farts and listen, and you’ll hear it come alive. That bird you usually hear first thing in the morning –

DW: – the wattle bird –

KW: – the wattle bird – and he wakes the forest up. And then after that, then they all start.

DW: The magpies in the area, you know, then usually the other birds don’t come around until the sun’s up –

KW: – no –

DW: – but the wattle bird’s the early bird. And we’ve got possums here. And they travel between Leo – he’s next door – to mine and next door but one, and they go for the birdseed as well. ‘Cos we all feed the birds (conversation, March 2008).

There’s an enchanting rhythm in the way each interjects and reiterates this telling, and within this exchange they both perform the knowing of Bermagui; KW beginning with, ‘if you really want to find out what a place is like ...’ followed by their litany of named birdcalls and the ways these connect to the approach of dawn. In these descriptions of sound and place we begin to discern how people map themselves into this soundscape. In their recounting of these sounds, KW and DW point to their own personal mappings of their neighbourhood within particular networks. For example, their list of birdcalls also maps onto connections with neighbours of ‘like-mindedness’, as in the description of Leo “he’s next door – to mine and next door but one” who also feeds the local birds and possums. Soundscapes are, therefore, mapped into networks of the non-human and human relationships in quite personal ways that then produce a sense of belonging.

These sonic mappings of place and belonging were also more complexly articulated. A first issue raised in analysis of material from the sound diaries and conversations suggests that belonging in Bermagui is not simply *represented* through the sounds of the non-human world. Rather, linked to such initial sound representa-

tions of Bermagui is a connection made to the *experiential* ways of being in place, as we hear in SB's telling of what the sounds of her printer mean to her in her everyday world, saying as she made the recording,

This is my printer, printing out something, and I love this sound because it makes me feel like I'm getting something done. And I can leave my office and go outside and be in the beautiful world...you might be able to hear the pitter patter of rain outside. And I feel like I'd just like to walk around and splash in it really. And this place when it's wet certainly takes on a new life, which I love (sound diary recording February 2008).

SB's discussion around these sounds suggests a more entangled relationship between categories of the non-human and human worlds and the ways in which individuals create relationships of belonging to Bermagui. The printer's sounds prompt her in terms of doing; she's completed work and can go outside. The sounds beyond the threshold of her home office become configured as nature in which to relax and play. Yet, this is not a nature that is experienced as a separate realm. SB goes on to talk about how, since moving there, she wants to be outside. 'I wasn't a nature person,' she explains, "Nature was something you looked at but didn't participate in... it's sort of one dimensional unless you're in the outdoors" (conversation February 2008). Listening to the pitter patter of rain, SB gives us clues to how Bermagui has reconfigured her understanding of nature, and how the sound of rain reconfigures her understanding of Bermagui.

Second, these sonic mappings evoke memories of past times and places. For instance CB talks about the sound of magpies and hints at the sometimes difficult relationship between father and son.

When I hear the magpies here, I automatically think of Binalong and my role as a father ... and things that I could have done better as a father. Young magpies here, those that make such a lot of noise, those raucous young things that are grey and, not quite fully covered up, hanging around with their parents—are a bloody nuisance in the sense that they make a heck of a lot of noise, not very musical, and they dig up your garden—I'm a keen gardener—and they get into your garden and dig around and send things everywhere while they're looking around for things to eat (conversation CB February 2008).

In these sorts of responses, we start to hear how the ways in which people listen and respond to place is intricately woven into their personal geography, history, and social networks that extend beyond the time-space of the here and now.

With some idea of the ways that residents of Bermagui listened to their everyday worlds, we turned to the listening practices of those who attended the festival. The Four Winds Festival began in 1991. Support initially came from a group of residents who had a love of classical and contemporary music and networks to professional classical music circuits. The festival venue itself is significant. Private land was made available for the festival venue in a natural amphitheatre some nine kilometres from Bermagui. Here, the music of the festival can be enhanced by sounds that stabilise understandings of an Australian bushland setting. Since its small beginnings, the festival now draws around 1,000 attendees each day to the ticketed program. A new feature of the 2008 festival, and part of the festival organisers' wishes to promote and celebrate social diversity and inclusivity, was a free opening concert held in a public park within Bermagui. We invited the participants who made the initial recordings of everyday Bermagui, as well as recruiting new participants,



Feast on a brightly-lit evening

to take part in creating festival sound diaries, and recordings were made at both the free opening event and the ticketed festival.

In our follow-up conversations at the festival, we hear a range of responses to the soundscape of the festival that nonetheless connect to the festival director's concerns for enhancing ideas of community. A number of those who took part in creating sound diaries spoke of the music and sounds of the festival site as a backdrop to what they saw primarily as the social space of the festival. This view is something the director readily acknowledges, saying:

The thing is that in feedback there's four reasons people came to Four Winds; and one of them was that they love the sort of social, community feel. And then they like that it's a very nourishing physical environment, and they think the beauty of the place is extraordinary ... And then, the third reason was that you didn't have to love all the music – you could be there and read the paper or do the crossword or go and have some oysters if you got a bit frustrated. And *then*—oh! oh! There's music! (conversation, 4 February 2008)

Yet, we argue this point of view is one more commonly expressed when evaluating music festivals through formal interview structures set apart from the actual sounds of the festival. Using this methodology alone, sound and music are understood primarily as the *context* for the event. In contrast, the conversations that arose with participants while listening to the sound diaries point to a different sensibility of this social space, one that is much more interconnected in and through different sensory modes. Importantly, this method of asking participants to focus on sound led to a different tuning in to the festival's social space, and what arose were thoughts and responses much more focused on how people interrelate. For example, one attendee at the festival described the effects of listening to the music performed in these terms;

R: One of the things that in your experiment, draws my attention to it like in the performance on Friday at the oval and here, getting moved by the music, and then I look around, I think this is my community, you know I look around and I, there is the women in the local corner shop and there is the people I know. And, I just think how lucky are we ... and also this community has drawn this thing [together].

Gordon: You think it enhances that sense of belonging and community that you have just been talking about?

R: And pride in the community,

Gordon: A sense of pride

R: And a touch of awe, something like this happening in your own backyard

(conversation: 22 March 2008).

Our request to focus on the music of the festival gave this participant a renewed means to express her sense of community in emotive, rhythmic and sonorous ways. In this framework, belonging is described in terms that are – both emotionally and bodily – affective qualities in and through which she orients herself within noise, silence, vibrations and music. Music is a uniting force at the festival. In this quotation there are elements of what Maffesoli (1996) terms the 'social divine'. For R, the experience of music is equivalent to religion, when religion is used to denote a unifying force, a 'common

matrix, a foundation of the 'being-together' (Maffesoli, 1996: 38). This attendance to sound also led participants to reiterate connections to the non-human, natural world of Bermagui. Participants spoke in terms of an almost dialogic relationship between music, sound and nature, in which the music performed on stage guided the listener to observe the physical setting of the festival. We hear this connection in one participant's conversation after creating the sound diary, where she explained,

how it [the music] stays in another energy form and later in the performance with the Indian singer my eyes would go to the trees and the slight movement. And, I found that I could hear the music better when I didn't watch the musicians but watched the trees and the plants – it went in through more channels – you know, the emotion, the heart, the body (conversation R 2008).

In such a response we hear how music is central to the ways subjectivities and space are conceptualized as interactive. Consequently, she comes to feel 'in place' in terms of being part of 'her community' through the very physiological responses of bodies. We hear in such responses how sound and music are an integral part of the ways space presses against the bodies of individuals, and of necessity touches at their subjectivities. In the context of this festival, it is an awareness of the non-human world that is re-activated – or perhaps it is that those attending are reminded of this. For example, we hear in this quote how music opens points of connection with the non-human world;

These couple of pieces of music, all of a sudden ... I really became conscious of a bit of wind coming up, and the birds started going a bit mad, and I heard a wedged tail eagle, and then I heard a bloody crow, and then [laughing] because it was about air, all the birds came to life, and I was looking at this brilliant blue sky, and it was just like, I suddenly became really conscious of the birds, but it was just perfect for the location, it was just a beautiful experience and [pause] totally engrossing and riveting for me, it was just transfixing. (conversation R 2008).

Nor were these connections between sound, music and the festival bushland setting merely serendipitous. The portrayal of nature-as-scenic landscape is a significant performed element in this festival. This was clearly demonstrated during the performance of Peter Sculthorpe's *Cello Dreaming* (1998). When the piece was introduced, musicians were scattered around the top edges of the amphitheatre. Accompanied by the birdcalls in the surrounding trees, the piece started with each musician improvising birdcalls as they walked down towards the stage. Included in this performance was musician William Barton, a Kalkadoon man from Mt Isa (Queensland), who as part of this performance also improvised bird calls on a didjeridu. With the exception of Barton, musicians gradually halted their improvisation after moving onto or behind the stage. Barton continued playing as he sat himself near the cello soloist, Emma Jane Murphy. Barton's mother, Delmae, herself an accomplished musician, moved onto the stage and performed a vocal improvisation accompanied by the didjeridu. Upon Barton's signal – blown overtones, a common cadential pattern for some traditional didjeridu performances – all became silent except for the cello, which opened with a slow, minor melody. Yet, in this particular performance, the space was also deeply intersected with a range of criss-crossing rela-

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1 However, his country in Aboriginal terms is not that of Bermagui, which raises complex issues around representation and place-relations in cross-cultural contexts. While members of the Yuin nation were present at the ticketed festival, there was no public acknowledgement of their presence, although a fire had been lit as part of a traditional smoking ceremony of welcome.

tionships between settler, immigrant and indigenous Australians. For example, Barton's Australian Indigenous identity recognises a much older set of connections to place,<sup>4</sup> while his performance on didjeridu reconfigures Sculthope's composition *Cello Dreaming* with a reclaiming of what 'Dreaming' conceptualises and expresses in Indigenous terms.

Conceptualising music as a performative practice in this way (Butler 1990) opens up a line to productively think on the ways in which both expected and unintended outcomes of music festival events can be evaluated. Music as a performative practice is thus conceptualized as involving openness and exchange, where bodies are affected and then affect each other in and through place. Individuals feel these exchanges and articulate them as emotions, but this also makes possible particular connections informed by, but always more than, the social context of 'proper' listening practice.

This focus also elicits ways of knowing through the listening body that cannot be expressed in language, those unspeakable experiences that are significant to place- and community-making (Fiumara 2006; Langer 1942; Wood et al 2007), as expressed by this participant,

the exquisite beauty – um – what is coming into my mind now is like moments of sacredness – where you are moved to that place – by music or a sacred ceremony or a sacred place – it is the same feeling that stays inside. Absolutely beyond words. Yes it is. Yet known to everyone (conversation R 2008).

The benefit of this method meant there was no need for pre-structured interviews, rather what was accommodated were the unpredictable feelings and bodily responses that arise within an event, and encouraged participants to listen self-reflexively. Attendees were given an opportunity to participate directly in the data gathering in ways that gave credence to emotional and difficult to articulate responses. In addition, these sound diaries facilitated access to the ways in which particular sounds became part of collective and individual embodied geographies and histories. Our point is simply that sound diaries and the conversations they generated provided possibilities to articulate the affective responses to sound in an improvised manner, as it happened, providing self-reflexive accounts and experiences of what happens within and between listening bodies. Interpretation required a form of narrative analysis where attention was given to not only what was said, but also verbal expression. The intonation in the participant's voice provides important clues to the bodily effects of listening.

What we have attempted to think through in this paper are ways to address the particularity of sonic processes that recognise that music festival participants have ears (and bodies). Although, as one participant explained, "People come together as a whole instrument – made up of the many human beings and form a new living being – it is just transitory – and then it is gone" (interview R 2008), the sorts

of knowledge about place and community derived from listening – the intuitive responses to rhythmic pulse, the influence of emotions and affect – offer new understandings of the social relationships between sound and music processes, place and bodies.

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