The Listening Workshop: Nature notes from WFAE 2011, Corfu

By Katharine Norman

Mopeds, skateboards, fountains, swallows, swimmers, dogs, birds and whales, and people, rabbits and pheasants, the lady from Farnham and the silent gramophone.

Having to arrive late, I miss the usual rituals of conference registration. A volunteer greets me and another lost latecomer with smiles, and directs us to Murray Schafer's outdoor workshop. It's a nice way to begin—a short walk in the morning sun with a new acquaintance and then a chance to listen.

Photo by Kyriaki Kanydi. Visit http://aweekofsoundandsilence.tumblr.com for Kyriaki Kanydi's project about the WFAE conference

R. Murray Schafer at the WFAE 2011 conference in Corfu.

The venue is in a shady garden beside a café, overlooking the sea. The air is still cool—in that way that won't last. The workshop participants are local children, and still running around in all directions, chattering and squealing. A trio of small boys peers over the wall to the beach below, giggling at an amply endowed lady who is struggling to make progress against the waves. Their teacher and I exchange a rueful, raised-eyebrows smile. No words necessary. A couple of young girls, enjoying being purposeful and responsible, move chairs into a circle. They lift them carefully to avoid scraping the metal legs against the paving stones. The woman who works in the café behind answers a call and walks out of earshot, rotating on one heel as she talks and listens. She fixes an unfocused gaze on the mid distance in that way people sometimes do when using a mobile phone, suspended in two places at once. Life is a mass of activity, and we are more aware of sound than we might imagine.

The children take their seats, and the workshop begins. Murray Schafer asks them to stand and then sit, doing so as quietly as possible. We listeners smugly agree that we can still hear them—no problem. Then he turns the tables, and asks the 'audience' of adult conference goers to do the same. We rise and sit down again, rather awkwardly, making an effort. The children are equally unimpressed, gleefully identifying the unsuccessfully muted rustles and shufflings of people trying to make no sound. It's a task destined to fail, but of course that doesn't matter; the real task has listening, not silence, as its goal.

Sometimes there is so much to listen to that silence, or at least relative tranquillity, seems a desirable alternative to the more natural, often noisy ways of moving in place. A couple of times in conversation during the conference I was asked for my definition of silence, and about my preferred soundscapes—with the implicit assumption that these would be quiet or somehow 'natural' in character. Silence and tranquillity are a wonderful retreat, but the hubbub of the world goes on, and also has its vast attractions. Why long for silence, or assume tranquillity as a preference? Sitting in silence is an impossible ideal, in any case, while we still breathe; we would none of us last a minute before the smallest child leapt forward to proclaim 'I heard you, I heard you!'.

What makes for a 'good' state for a soundscape is a difficult, moral question. The search for silence has become emblematic of a desire to escape from what appears beyond control and anti-social. But it is people—vocal, loud, garrulous, unpredictable, selfish, greedy and generous, and many other things in unquantifiable proportions besides—not silence, that are not only the problem but also the solution when it comes to creating healthy places in which to live in sound. In one conference presentation Meri Kytö, a Finnish researcher, presents a brief roundup of her ethnographical work on apartment sound: in an apartment block in Finland the first course of action if annoyed by noisy neighbours was to call the police, anonymously, whereas in Istanbul she found this course of action was unheard of: instead, there would be face-to-face discussion between neighbours. Nothing involving human nature is simple, and no solution can be entirely right or wrong. Should we try for legislation or negotiation, or something in-between? Should we lobby for complete prohibition, or cultivate more social empathy so that 'inconsiderate soundmaking' is minimized in consequence? Or should we ban excessive sounding indoors, forcing heavy sounders to stand huddled outside buildings in the freezing cold, listening together to overloud headphone music or talking loudly on their mobile phones. Hey, at least they'd be out of earshot, right? But what would it solve? And perhaps it is not 'quiet' but a measure of individual control that people yearn for.

The workshop is gathering pace. Schafer guides the circle of children through various listening exercises, calling for volunteers to stand in the middle and say their name with different kinds of articulation that the listeners then imitate. It is all good-humoured and giggly, and focused on attention. A tall, gangly boy goofs about a bit, swinging his arms, self-conscious in front of his peers. A bright, cheerful girl plays to the crowd. Her ponytail swings from side to side as she cocks her head to listen for a response, resting her cheek on one finger. Even saying your name out loud can be an intricate social performance that encompasses far more than sound.

The children all know each other from school. The visiting adults are less at home: we watch, listen, smile, and take part in a more restrained fashion— still at that stage where the conference is young and distances are preserved.

Mopeds, skateboards & fountains

As people gradually become relaxed in each other's company their social movement becomes a far less awkward dance. Their senses reach out into an increasingly familiar environment, and with this comes the desire both to listen and respond.

The summer evenings in small Mediterranean towns are perfect for people watching, and listening, and I am a shameless eavesdropper. Old Corfu town, or Kerkyra, is suffused with the putt-putting of the motorbikes and mopeds that are everywhere, insinuating themselves into the winding streets of the Venetian quarter. A young guy pulls up beside a nightclub to shout a greeting to a friend, rocking the moped to a halt as an extension of his body; a middle-aged couple putter by, stiffly upright on a motorbike with their small dog propped up against the handlebars. And in the seafront public park and plaza there's evening chatter, parents calling, and behind it the rhythms of cars coming and going, doors opening and closing, music from clubs and restaurants. A grandfather lifts his baby grandson to touch a fountain, both grin from ear to ear with the self-same smile. A small child on a rumbling skateboard nearly runs me over, her face scrunched up in novice concentration. Friends gather to lose themselves in political discussion; elderly ladies perch in a row on a long park bench, conversing occasionally while watching the world go by; late season tourists stroll past. Greece is struggling in economic crisis, as it has struggled in so many different ways before, and there is worry and concern in the air—but there are also always the rituals of community, maintained in a social landscape that offers its own kind of tranquility—and just happens to create an interesting sound. So every evening while I'm in Corfu I sneak off to this 'fringe' event: a more 'local' conference that comes together and then disperses—a soundscape of people fraternizing, observing, chattering and calling, eventually leaving to settle for the night.

Swallows

The morning air is already heating up as the sky loses its early haze. Overhead, a swirl of darting swallows spits shards of sound into the blue—at first I can hardly make them out, they are so high up that they are almost invisible. But this will become one of the keynote sounds for these days in the hot sun in Corfu, along with the sounds of the waves.

What do the children taking part in this workshop think of their ordinary listening experience? Do they notice the swallows—are they yet embedded in their sense of home? Will they remember them, twenty, thirty or forty years hence, triggered by an unexpected moment of recognition? A few weeks previously, on a windy weekend away in a coastal town in England, I had woken up to sand martins performing the same airborne acrobatics, clicking and peeping above the houses in search of food. It had taken me quite some time to figure out what was happening. But now, this common listening thread binds these two very different places together and I understand the sound almost immediately.

Gilbert White, an educated 18th-century English country parson writing in his home village of Selbourne, sent hundreds of letters to similarly minded naturalist friends. In them, he joyfully describes the natural environment surrounding him; including the annual departure and return of swallows and house martins, which he held in great affection. One of the first to notice migration, his observations of his local environment were written at a time when it was far more common for naturalists to examine and dissect dead, and therefore silent, specimens. But interconnectedness is a living thing. White's correspondence, full of descriptions of birdsong and seasonal change, marks him out as England's first ecologist—one of the first naturalists to have a real concern and respect for the environment, and for his place within it.

When I get home I search for an online sample of the sound of swallows and come across a YouTube video of swifts, which is close enough. The video is lovely, but it's the string of informal comments that move me. They show just how universally important sound can be in defining a sense of home:

"My city (Rostov-on-don, Russia) full of swifts too! This birds building nest under the roofs and balcony."

"I hear this sound every summer here where I live. "

"I love that sound… it reminds me of hot summer days here in Sweden." (www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNy5KltSNLQ&feature=related).

Gilbert White would more than understand what's going on: people are still passing nature notes back and forth, it's just that delivery times are so much faster than in his day, and it is easier to share.

The children and audience have moved on to a new exercise now, this time working together. With eyes closed they try to locate a volunteer who walks around the space talking.

There was a time when people spoke of the 'information highway', as if digital communications would move sedately from place to place to given destinations. But the digital has infused existence with such immediacy that this metaphor has fast become redundant: the digital, for many, is in our very veins—and the current anxiety to curate, archive and 'know' all this information is symptomatic of the realization that, increasingly, the digital is 'us'. Communities gather in the no-places of the online, with people forming meaningful relationships and talking about many things; cultures are formed as entirely digital entities—and there are listening landscapes too, and memories of sound. For some that mediated communication still feels like a dislocated, quasi-schizophonic experience that has negative connotations, but for others, it increasingly feels like meeting in a public square among friends and acquaintances with similar lives, in order to exchange observations, play, and watch the world go by.

Arriving very late on my first night in Corfu, I'd fallen into bed without paying much attention to my surroundings. So in the morning when I eased open the shutters of my fourth-floor room I was surprised by a glorious clutter of mottled tiled roofs studded with aerials and TV satellite dishes. I recalled how in Havana people turn their satellite dishes towards America, seeking US TV stations—CNN news blaring out from semi-derelict houses, and how my English father-in-law in Italy turns his satellite towards the BBC, to catch the news from home. The distance between us contracts as the airwaves fill with sound.

The blind listeners' outstretched arms move together like anemone fronds, as they follow the sounds they are tracking, together. Without even seeing it, they have formed a listening community.

Later, in exactly the same spot in this garden but now in the cool darkness of late evening, conference goers put on wireless headphones to walk around in Marcus Leadley's engaging sound installation. Somewhat in the manner of a Kubisch soundwalk, sound samples are triggered by the listener's position in an invisibly mapped space. It's an intriguing but unnatural experience to be seeking sound in a place you cannot 'see', where it is *you* rather than the sound that moves, and while the parallel visual-sonic world of 'here and now' continues all around. But I think what makes this kind of experience most strange (not necessarily a bad thing) is being publicly engaged in a mysteriously private experience of the spatial world. Wandering around like mad people, swaying and moving to locate invisible sonic signposts, we must look very odd to observers. Indeed I suffer the indignity of being severely reprimanded by a tiny pet dog, despite its owner's protestations.

On Schafer's signal, everyone opens their eyes and laughter immediately ensues, at finding how accurate, or inaccurate, the listening guesses have been. Either way, the experience was evidently a shared pleasure and surprise. Listening in the dark is an interesting game with unexpected consequences.

Swimmers

In the pleasant map-lined room where the papers are presented the windows and shutters are open to let in the trace of a breeze. But noise sometimes wafts in from the downstairs bar so it's a little hard to hear the person talking, and the sunlight throws a glare on the PowerPoint slides. People move to close the shutters. Listening in the darkened, quietened space is fine for a while, but it's not long before the shutters are re-opened, and the outside world returns exultantly. We need to breathe.

During the conference microphones are routinely used to amplify the presenters, with the usual ritual of checking they're on, moving them into position, setting the levels for optimum use. Nobody objects to this unnatural amplification of 'natural' sound: quite the opposite; the audience members are here to listen, and soon indicate when they can't hear. It appears that there are certain sensory aids and prostheses—the projector, the microphone—that are not only tolerated, but welcomed.

There is nothing black and white about sound environments, or about how we listen to them. And there is nothing so simple as a 'sound environment' that is entirely divorced from other sensory experience. When the shutters are reopened, I glance out of a window at a patch of the bluest sea I've ever seen. The sun blazes overhead. In the water, three people well past middle age are treading water so that they can chat together. Suspended between air and sea, they are exchanging gossip, while the salt water laps over their shoulders. A distant ferry passes behind. I cannot hear a word they're saying, but would not have missed that picture for the world.

There have been a series of quiet listening games, and the children are getting a little tired and fidgety. Schafer moves on to an energetic game where two people walk towards each other and swap places. The added complication is that they must move with a silly walk and a sound of their own choosing. And as they pass each other they must 'exchange' behaviour—taking on the other person's walk and sound.

A large stray dog wanders through and watches the children for a while, scratches the ground, gathers that nothing of especial food-related interest is happening, and leaves without attracting very much attention.

Greece is not noted for its concern for animal welfare, and Corfu has many stray dogs in various states of health. A Greek friend informs me ruefully that they are intermittently rounded up and 'put down', a practice I find hard to take. But individual practices don't necessarily fit with the prevailing culture of a place. I also saw a family walking a glossy poodle, a dozy puppy proudly clasped by a teenage girl, and the aforementioned self-important terrier. Life is incongruous. People can be willfully blind or deaf when they feel impotent, or unwilling, to make change, yet sometimes change happens by degrees, as knowledge and values are exchanged. But not always. The solution is not to make attempts to rescue every stray, because there will always be more strays while certain attitudes still hold. So the difficulty is in knowing how and where to start—and often it's not something you can achieve alone.

The game involves a degree of listening and a degree of empathy—and a great deal of hilarity from the audience as, in turn, pairs of children, and now adults too, hop, hobble, scream, whoop, gibber, twirl and skip towards each other. Things are almost raucous, but everyone's listening and nobody's holding their ears. Quiet just wouldn't work, and loud can be exhilarating and bring people together.

Birds and whales, and people

The conference is a joy to be at, and a chance to meet and communicate with people passionate about the sonic environment—presenting our research, talking quietly in the sun, or simply listening. Later in the conference Nigel Frayne, long-time WFAE Chair, provides an extempore history of how the organization came into existence in 1993, formalizing the communications reverberating from the earlier World Soundscape Project. The reverberations continue, with the WFAE's somewhat understated function, to provide 'an international association of affiliated organizations and individuals, with common concern for the state of the world's soundscapes'. Frayne's quietly intelligent comments in paper sessions are a similarly understated highlight of the conference for me.

But most of us attending this friendly, well-organized conference are not members of the WFAE, and the organization's influence remains frustratingly slight outside the community that has come to it via first- or secondhand encounters with Schafer's influential thought. If you are not a member already it's quite hard to find out who the WFAE are—who is on the board, who is currently Chair, what the WFAE does. I received no leaflets or information on joining at the conference. And yet there has been an explosion of interest in listening, sound and environment in the last twenty years, emerging simultaneously in a wide array of disciplines. Only some are regularly represented in this friendly, articulate community, with its emphasis on the media arts and cultural studies, and its focus on the 'state of world soundscapes'.

While the distance between technology and sound may have been compressed, I think there is way too much space between the various constituencies that think, or might think, about sound and environment. Perhaps one challenge for the WFAE, and for its members and potential members it hopes to attract, is to consider how to maximize the potential of a wired, transglobal community, where projects that touch on sound, listening and environment are multifarious, and interdisciplinary, and where sound may be only a part.

Two particular concerns of acoustic ecology are certainly well represented at the conference: the threat from uncaring human activity to rare and precious natural habitats, and the threat to animal welfare from sounds made by uncaring human activity. David Monacchi's live visual and sonic manipulation of the spectrum of equatorial rainforest recordings brings the creatures of this dense soundscape into focus—heightening both their individual communications and the way they are embedded in the sound environment. A stark point is made when this sonic environment is suddenly transplanted by visual documentary footage of logging. It is a simple and effective juxtaposition. We shudder, as sonic beauty is snatched away before our very eyes.

Keynote speaker, bioacoustician Chris Clark describes his work and provides an expert account of sonic pollution from shipping noise and air compression guns used in undersea oil prospecting, and the effect on marine life communication, especially whales. We listeners gasp in astonishment and react with distress. Things are suddenly, and unavoidably close to home. A realist, Clark asserts that simply feeling bad will not change things, and suggests tackling decision makers where it hurts—their policies, their wallets, their political ambitions—as one recourse. Shuddering despite the warmth of the conference room is—to put it brutally—not going to save the world.

More and more, as the conference progresses and one after another interesting study or artistic response is outlined, I ponder on how attempts to 'stop' people, and their noise-making machines, can be at best a temporary patch and at worse a failure to understand the social landscape in which sound is but a part.

If the disciplines that at least touch on considering listening, sound and environment in their daily concerns are not necessarily

represented by the WFAE's relatively small membership, I wonder if there is another mission for the WFAE here? A distributed forum with an international brief is ideally positioned as a place to bring different organizations in different disciplines together in a valuable conversation. A forum is after all a place of assembly: a public square in which to spend time, watch and listen to each other, and strengthen communities. Perhaps a way forward for raising listening consciousness is to build stronger umbrella networks, where those differing and often small groups and organizations who are concerned with sound and listening can bump up against each other in a space about 'listening and sound'—a place as much for interested people who may be just 'passing through' as for the established groups of artists and scholars, scientists, acousticians and ecologists who are primarily invested in sound and environment. Acoustic ecology, in its concern with the sonic environment, has sound and listening—not silence—at the heart of its mission—and sharing that mission on a larger stage might in fact involve making far more noise.

A group of older British tourists pass through the crowd and are rather surprised by all the activity. An elderly lady knows another Brit when she sees one and asks me what's going on. I explain that this is a workshop as part of a conference, and that the children are learning to be more aware of listening and sound. She relays this information back to her equally elderly friend, in the tone of a seasoned expert. 'Oh, they're just teaching them how to hear things!' she says, in a loud stage whisper.

This is the way with games of Chinese whispers: something is always changed in the relaying of half-caught sounds, and what starts as one message can end up as quite another. But even if the message is softened, muted, and fades to a rather less focused definition, perhaps something comes across.

The tourists smile indulgently at the children, watch and listen for a minute or two and then wander off, seemingly satisfied that although they don't really understand the point of what we're doing, it is enjoyable, well-meaning, and benign.

Rabbits and pheasants, the lady from Farnham and the silent gramophone

On one day of the conference we all pile into a boat to take a trip to the small island of Vidos, once a prison island but now an idyllic nature reserve where pheasants and semi-tame rabbits wander around freely in an amusing co-existence. Over a relaxed and friendly al fresco lunch, our table raises a toast in several languages, 'Cheers', 'Good health', 'Yiamis', 'Skaal'! The recent students next to me chatter effusively in Greek, they are helpers at the conference. I ask them about their favourite Greek dishes—really I just want to listen to these beautiful, vibrant young women who are enjoying life so much today. The pines sway gently in the afternoon heat, people produce musical instruments and Greek songs are sung. Several people are recording sound. I wander off to buy a beer and the friendly woman behind the bar greets me in a broad English accent. Browned by the sun, she is still far from being Greek. We have enough common ground to exchange pleasantries for a minute or two and I discover she's been in Greece for over thirty years but she says 'I come from Farnham, Surrey', in the present tense—because, in some sense, it's still home. She sounds as if she left just yesterday.

I see the elderly British tourists next day at breakfast in my hotel, and on the following mornings—always sitting at the same table and fussing with the waiter about the proper way to make English tea. They are making a home away from home via trivial familiar rituals, the same way I stick on my iPod to listen to BBC podcasts when I get back to my room. There is nothing wrong with escaping for a while—whether into silence or into sound.

I make my way inside the taverna in search of the bathroom, and come across a silent gramophone. Moreover, it's a gramophone that could never have made a sound, being crafted from wicker and wood with a pinecone as its stylus. I have no idea what kind of music it might play—perhaps a soundscape of sun and waves, of the talking of friends and a hot October afternoon when many people laughed and sang together. On the boat back to Corfu the Greek flag aspires and flaps against the mast, and the sense of relaxation belies the difficult times.

The workshop ends, and we applaud each other. Chairs are dragged back to the café tables, and people meander off in groups or singly, greeting each other, talking, already on their way to the next event. Somewhere a motorbike revs into action. An electric drill starts up from inside the building behind, or perhaps it has been going on for a while. A dog barks. Above, the swallows wheel and dip in rapidly changing configurations, continuing their intricate sonic communications.

Silent Gramophone

Katharine Norman's endeavours include writing about listening and sound, making creative work through the medium of sound, and thinking about our listening relationships—both sonic and metaphorical—in everyday life. She is currently a visiting research fellow at De Montfort University, Department of Music, Technology and Innovation and has recently guest edited two forthcoming issues of *Organised Sound* journal (Cambridge University Press), on the theme of Sound, Listening and Place. More information on her work can be found at http://www.novamara.com.