

## My Ears Are Already Open

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Long before the present day, in the times when humankind was struggling to stay alive in a wilderness far-removed from city-life, it had to keep its various senses - sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing - constantly active as an extension of its vital functions. When considering all of the senses that humans possess, it can be considered that hearing was the fastest and most effective one, alerting an individual to possible incoming threats from the environment. Since sound reaches the human ear from all directions, it is easier for an individual to become aware of a threat through hearing than it is by any of the other senses. To make a simplistic comparison with sight, for example, humans can only clearly see a certain part of the world located in front of them, restricted by a certain angle. By contrast, humans detect the existence of sound from all directions, and locate its origin by means of ears positioned on either side of the head.

Yet in the present-day, especially following the great chaos of the metropolises, our sense of hearing has arrived at a state where it seems to be less sensitive. In the city, sounds suppress one another, vie for attention, and are always in a state of conflict. The complex harmonies constituted by sounds such as the roaring of the cars, the sirens of ambulances, the rumbling of construction vehicles, the yelling of street vendors and the music that emanates loudly from venues, define the characteristic sound pattern of the metropolitan city.

When we get outside, the world of sound offered to us by the city develops entirely out of our control, whereas the isolated soundscape in our lives at home is largely constituted by our own choices. When we get out of our homes and set onto the road, events occur in our vicinity independently of one another to create a sound panorama. This, in turn, is perceived to varying extents by the individuals who encounter it, and for some it has become indistinguishable over time. For individuals in society whose ears have habitually become closed, the chaos taking place around them simply constitutes a mundane occasion of everyday life, and they continue their unresponsiveness



towards it perhaps without even realising. This desensitisation has resulted in an increasingly common attitude towards our surroundings which positions the urban environment simply as a noisy habitat with a high degree of sound.

As a reaction to this situation, we can see that a section within society chooses to isolate itself with portable music players and headphones. We can also see that these individuals in question, who in this way live isolated from one another, have been increasing in number throughout various parts of the city; especially as the personal entertainment attributes of mobile phones have developed over time, and the usage of shared networks between users has increased. These individuals who exist in their own world of sound, unaware of what's happening around them, pose an independent stance against the sound pattern of the city.

It can be said that another type of individual, who poses a different stance against the world of sound where they live, are the people who are still ex-

remely sensitive to the sounds surrounding them. In particular, it is the environmental sounds that might be described as noise which are the focus of such sensitivity. People who react to such sound phenomena, sounds which are above the level restricted by the local authorities, oppose such events by defending their legal rights. However, it is quite difficult to propose an argument through the aesthetic and ethical values of sound, since they depend on relative criteria, and in some closed societies such aesthetic and ethical values are taken under control by the authorities.

In an event that took place in Turkey in 2012, Prof. Dr. Nazan Aydın consulted the public prosecution office claiming that the mosques in Erzurum have been broadcasting the *azan*<sup>1</sup> much above the legal threshold. In conclusion, the public prosecution office decided that the complaint was invalid by declaring that *azan*, an essential symbol for the religion of Islam, can't be characterised as noise.<sup>2</sup> Considering all of the perceptual stimuli, it might be argued that sound broadcast prominently within public areas could clearly constitute a violation of rights. While you have the off-chance of not seeing an advertisement or propaganda poster on the street, there is almost no possibility that you would not hear a loud noise. This situation is experienced intensively and distinctively during times of political election via the propaganda speeches that emanate loudly from the speakers. These callouts, which are broadcast at extremely high volume, demonstrate an incredible social irresponsibility and, rather than informing the electors of their political choices, instead cause notable discomfort to a sound-sensitive populace.

Personal sound awareness, which is found in individuals, is active and possibly subject to be damaged or diminished over time. It also comes into effect much more apparently when encountering a new sound environment for the first time. This is because sound is perceived by the individual as an active tool in detecting and distinguishing the characteristics of any given environment. If a visitor to a new place for example, doesn't know the common spoken language of the conversations taking place around them, then this is

also added as an extra layer of sound in the city's ongoing soundscape. As Michel Chion states in his book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, the hearing of a conversation, in a language unknown to you, turns exactly into a state of 'reduced listening,' and the listener starts to hear the words as individual sound layers independent from their meaning.

The sounds generated by transportation vehicles seem to have become an essential and symbolic factor in constituting the sound character of any given city, particularly in those cities overwhelmed by industry. Some cities resonate with perceptions of speed via the noises of cars and the Doppler Effect, some cities resonate with chaos via the sounds of motorbikes, and some cities, via the frequency and usage of motor horns, reflect both the intense structure of the city-traffic and the moods of the people in the traffic. The sound panoramas of cities have become increasingly generic as the population of automobiles grows and, with each passing day and as distances become shorter and shorter, our world seems to be diminishing quickly. However, industry is not

the only factor to shape the sound panorama of a metropolitan city. Human communities, the true owners of the cities, continue to communicate with each other constantly with their shared languages, and this communication finds its voice much louder and more actively in the streets of some cities.

It can be said that in a city like Istanbul, where the four seasons are lived to their fullest during the course of a year, life is found to be most active down in the streets. Street vendors wander the roads and pavements, while craftsmen and artisans stand in front of their shops, actively appealing for the public to enter. This is why the streets of Istanbul, and especially its bazaars, constitute a merriment of sound. When you start walking from Taksim, the newly popularised centre of the city, to Sultanahmet, the old historic centre, it is possible that you witness a cultural sound panorama which is dominant across the entire country. The music loudening from the venues, the yelling of the vendors, the people running about all around, provide you with clues about the dynamic life-style of the city. If you stop in Eminönü and decide to make a boat trip on the Bosphorus (which is one of the unparalleled beauties of Istanbul), the strong sound of the weary, white ferry captures your aural attention immediately, and starts to make you listen right at the beginning of your trip. During the journey, the continual salutes emitting from ferries passing by is accompanied by the sound of the seagulls, who burst into sight around you as you immerse yourself in the beauties of the Bosphorus. Another companion of this joyous journey is the melodic sounds of the spoon with which you stir your tea on the ferry, as it hits the glass which has its own specific shape. The ferry trip, which takes you away for a while from the complex sound pattern of the city, helps you to overcome the weariness of the day.

Istanbul, which embraces you with new surprises around every corner, has a structure within which you can find serenity and tranquility from place to place, even in its chaotic state as a metropolitan city. Specific elements of the city's sound panorama are revealed in the sound recordings of Magda Stawarska-Beavan. As a sound artist living in Istanbul, I found myself in a puz-

zle as I listened to the recordings. Though the sounds provided various clues about the places in which they were taken, they also sometimes created an increased sense of reality within which I tried to feel the sounds around me. I would stop listening to the recording with the intention of solving the puzzle. This sound collage, which is made with the most tiny and indistinguishable interventions possible, shows us how complete the sound panorama of Istanbul is, built on the city's over-8000-years-old historical fabric and traditions.

<sup>1</sup>The call to prayer in Islam – t.n.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cnntrk.com/2012/guncel/05/07/yukse.ezan.sesi.sikayetine.ret/660199.0/> (30.November.2014)