
Conkers (listening out for organised experience)

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By comparison to contemporary artists in other disciplines, such as the visual and literary arts, composers of sound-based art and electroacoustic music sometimes appear strangely diffident in articulating their motivations in other than material-based terms, or at least seem so within scholarly debate. Reception-based investigations (such as Weale 2005) seem either at a relatively early stage or understandably inconclusive, with an emphasis on how the listener accesses, or might access, the work. While this might appear a semantic nicety, I suggest that it could be fruitful to proceed instead from considerations of how the work might ‘access’ the listener, via considering diverse experience, rather than direct associative responses to sound, as material that is organised in both creating and listening to sound-based work – and by whom left open to negotiation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lately I have been picking up horse chestnuts (or ‘conkers’ as we call them in the UK). Each night the driveway is littered with the latest fall, gleaming in the September dusk, or squashed and splayed open by passing cars. I juggle a handful of my slithery prizes in one hand as I fumble to unlock a still unfamiliar door in an apartment that’s temporarily ‘home’. Two days later my latest finds are disappointingly wrinkled, their shine dulled like pebbles pulled from water. But as more and more of them harden in the dish by the door they bring to my mind an increasingly rich evocation of half-remembered experience: of a time of year, a place, a month, a memory of a nip in the air, the first frosts soon, school beginning, new shoes, new coat, the last sun before the gloomy days of the autumn term. Behind all this recollection some as yet intangible things are gradually gathering together. I think I may be on my way to making something, but am still organising my thoughts as to why and what that might be, and what it would mean to anyone else. I’ll put a few more conkers in the bowl and come back to it later.

Much theorising about music and sound-based art that employs recognisable ‘real world’ sources rests on divining those associations that certain kinds of sounds and sound behaviours might reliably elicit in the listener, proceeding to a proof via supporting examples from appropriate works. In his valuable survey of listeners to electroacoustic music, for instance,

Rob Weale finds that listeners often make independently similar associations to sounds, and certain sounds or gestures evidently (and more or less reliably) evoke certain images or scenarios, which are nevertheless inflected by individual experience.

Sixteen listeners (thirteen InEx, two Ex and one HiEx), out of the forty-two who identified the accordion sound, interpreted it as French music and/or as indicating a French location. For example, 18InEx/M ‘accordion gives impression of France – Paris’, 2InEx/NM-A ‘accordion – French sound’. Interestingly, five of these listeners were in the non-musician category. This suggests that their lived experiences, rather than musical education, has given them the means through which to place a particular musical style/instrumental sound into a cultural context. (Weale 2005: 139)

Naturally the hit rate for accurate sound identification (and/or sufficiently similar listener associations) is high when the sound sources are clearly recognisable (speech, planes, birds...) and when the group culturally homogenous. It is unsurprising, in the case of this UK-based listener grouping, that many listeners had obviously encountered the familiar stereotype of an accordion-playing Parisian in their TV-viewing or ad-reading experience.

Rob Weale is upfront in admitting to a focus on ‘fixed medium works where the composer’s communicative intent is based wholly or in part on the real-world referential characteristics of the sounding content’, which he notes as ‘*a subset of a corpus of works that appears to be based, for the most part within academia and the professional E/A art music community*’ (Weale 2005: 2 [my italics]).

Projects such as Weale’s are gratifyingly inquisitive with regard to what listeners, both ‘experienced’ or ‘inexperienced’, might be ‘finding’ in works (or indeed not finding), but they are few and far between, and perhaps tend to apply a rather expansive empirical methodology to a self-proscribed field. As with all ethnographic studies the author can betray his or her own proclivities (as might any; I am a prime example) inadvertently through choice of listening repertoire.

Rather than seek proofs for any kind of alternative proposition, I want to offer a sequence of assertions that will perhaps serve as a means of departure and

re-arrival: away from tracking the associative meaning attached to specific sounds, towards understanding how recognition serves only as a starting point for a richer organisation of individual experience.

1. **Beyond listening to the sounds.** Paradoxically, retaining the listener's 'commitment' may be more challenging in works employing real-world, often recognisable sounds, especially in those works that evade or weaken perceivably 'musical' construction (rhythmic or pitch-based organisation, in whatever terms). If people choose not to listen to sound-based work attentively, it may be because there is insufficient reason for them to go beyond the sounds. There is no story to follow, or no invitation to make one up.
2. **Sounds are not all there is to listening.** Listening is a mode of attention within the context of a richly textured world, not an *in vitro* activity (see Clarke 2005). This is a truism to some, but still appears a sacrilege to others when it comes to sound-based work. Accepting ecological modes of perception, by extension text, image or other non-sounding elements can be integral stimuli in what remains at root a sound, or perhaps more properly a listening-based work. And these stimuli also access individual listener experience: memory.
3. Sound-based art can make a **direct address** – that is, it can make an appeal to the individual listener's internalised organising of prior experience via the appearance of a direct sharing of a 'narrative of experience'. (And, incidentally, in this sense might be deemed akin to narrative prose in some respects, though 'narrative' by no means implies a linear A-to-B progression.)
4. Following from this, recognition of a 'narrative' of organised experiences moves listeners towards finding somehow comparable stories in their own experience, a commitment that brings a **convergence of autoethnographies** (an autoethnography is an autobiographical narrative that explores the writer's personal experience).

2. BEYOND LISTENING TO THE SOUNDS

we have a need for a new kind of literature to explain works of art for sound, one that listens differently to what is going on and allows for subjective interpretation as a valued tool. (Norman 2000: 217)

Quoting yourself is a feedback loop that too easily invites solipsistic distortion, but coming across these words unexpectedly (kindly quoted by Leigh Landy (2007: 105) from a book edited by Simon Emmerson (2000)) I was comforted to find that I still believed them, as far as they go. Moreover, I now tend to think that composers might not only benefit from placing a higher value on both their own and their

listeners' subjective interpretation but also have a 'moral duty' to address subjective interpretation now and then. And by subjective interpretation I do not simply mean the immediate associative (and thus experience-informed) meanings that a listener brings to sounds, but the rich hinterland of personal history that extends and branches out far beyond this. We implicitly acknowledge the existence of this hinterland in claiming associative listening relationships, but as composers and makers, and writers and theorists, it might be worth putting on sturdier walking shoes to strike out more purposefully across these fertile alluvial plains. Beyond listening to the sounds.

2.1. An audience greater than one-(self)

The admonishment 'consider your reader' rings in the ears of all but the most perversely obscure novelist (likely one never to be published) as a reminder to make the story relevant and communicative, but 'consider your listener'? There is sometimes a deafening silence in that respect. A main concern of artistic expression, surely, is to reach out and achieve some point of contact? But apparently I may be wrong in this assumption, since for some composers working with sound-based art it appears that listening to others' work is far less engaging than making it. And if that is the case, by implication the composer is barely concerned with whether his or her finished work communicates to an audience greater than one.

many participants noted that they 'compose' material much more than they listen to that of others – which in itself suggests a significant supply and demand imbalance. Many respondents noted that they find the act of composition more 'engaging' and 'rewarding' than the act of listening, that their pleasure comes entirely from making it, from the compositional process. (Weale 2008: 3)

I will try to resist making cheap accusations of sonic onanism at this point. But I do note, as the lights dim in yet another university blackbox auditorium or *ad hoc* club, that entire audiences for electroacoustic music can sometimes similarly fade into a collective entity of like-minded peers, still largely situated within either academia or other rather esoteric cliques. A music for expert listeners only, listening to themselves as an end in itself. Yet would it not be fruitful to *start* from acknowledging the tacit know-how that any listener brings, and the fact that we are not necessarily 'like-minded' in our responses to sounds: where they lead us. It may be more productive to relish the uncontrollable inevitability that responses surrounding sounds can draw wildly differing autoethnographic histories from individual listeners. Knowing all the associative details of these individual responses is not only impossible but also, if a maker is concerned with story rather than process, unnecessary to a work's success; that is, to someone choosing to listen, again and again.

2.2. The Quiet American (aka Aaron Ximm)'s *Circumlocution*

The piece is here: www.quietamerican.org/disc_vox_american.html.

2.2.1. *Listening 1*

Thumps separated by space (silence) and a hissing in the background – very quiet, like bad recording noise perhaps. I think the thumps may be footsteps – slow and making a noise, on a wood floor I'd guess. In my mind he (?) is climbing up a spiral staircase. A creaking door opens and the outside world becomes louder – passing motorcycle or moped, then a sudden outburst of collaged traffic/machine sounds – it's not 'real' it's like some kind of dark cubist fast construction: in my mind I 'see' it – black and brown, dark colours, shards. There are rhythmic patterns that arise out of the collaging effect, then there is another creak and some xylophone patterns join in – same kind of rhythm and dynamic, loud, incessant. The door creaks and closes. Footsteps again (this is, as in the opening, an inside space – but not small): in my mind he is descending from a rooftop. The door creak occurs several more times, quietly each time – I don't like this, it makes it 'fake' suddenly – it's exactly the same sound, not the same door being closed more than once. A female voice says 'what are you recording...' in an amused tone. It sounds like they kiss at the point the piece ends.

Brownian motion, or, a stochastic *dérive*. Brownian motion is the constant unpredictable motion of motes under the influence of energetic (if invisible) particles. A stroll with no destination in an unfamiliar city can be an exercise in serendipity. Guy Debord defined *dérive* as intentional drifting along the contours of psychological geography (particularly in an urban environment). A private hotel room is a profound privilege. (Aaron Ximm's programme note to *Circumlocution*)

2.2.2. *Listening 2*

(Have read the text now – interestingly it doesn't help out at all on what the sounds are, except the implication that the sound recordist started out and returned to a private hotel room – and this was a luxury, a place apart. But it does confirm my sense of what the piece is 'about'.)

This time I notice more about the recording quality – the sound at the beginning has quite a bit of extraneous noise from the sound recordist's clothing. Also now I hear cicadas in the background – perhaps I imagine them – and the distant sounds of people inside the hotel, very occasional. The sonic quality of the footsteps is now richer – I can hear the reverberation of each footstep extending like a shadow from the 'actual' sound – this image is visual. I notice that the door sound is not only repeated the very first time, but also crops up in the ensuing collage, as do

other sounds. In fact it is repetition that I noticed more this time – the 'kiss' sound from the end is in the collage, also the door, and the sound of a voice (which groans, and becomes intelligible on a later repetition: 'oh... my... god...'). The sudden noisy collage was just as 'shocking' this time – a machine-gun like tempo and timbre – but it is more episodic than I noticed before. The second 'returning' footsteps rising, then entering the room (the sound of the door is followed by the sound of keys – isn't that the wrong way around?). Then the slam of the door. Perhaps there are two doors, perhaps the footsteps are outside? She is inside, waiting, relaxed, she has been still for a while – her voice and manner are of someone who is doing nothing much, at home. They kiss.

2.2.3. *Listening 3*

This time I was much more aware of the various car and bike horns, and the way they are scattered around in the collage, spatially as well as rhythmically. I also found myself much more 'immersed' in the collage, as if it was very 'present' – or as if I was present in it. I enjoyed this and actually found it difficult to 'attend' to the kinds of sounds I was hearing, because I wanted to let myself ride on this immersion. I noticed how the voice is used to end the collage, after the 'oh my... God' is finally said discernibly the collage rapidly thins and stops. I guess he is walking downstairs at the outset, and arrives at the street level: before he opens the door you hear a moped going by, through the still closed door. Confusing that on the 'return' the door is opened to the hotel room and it's the same door – so it's a cheat, or a circle, or a deliberate non sequitur. He plays with his footsteps on the way back, making different rhythms and putting in extra taps like heavy-footed skipping. I didn't like that on first listening (though I noticed it) but now I'm getting fond of it – he's going 'home' ... and she will be there, to greet him I know. Now noticed that when he came back 'home' the motorbike/moped sound goes on, in the foreground, while she is talking. It's incongruous; it's like a memory of what just happened, it's like it's all going to happen again. I'm unable to listen now without hearing this as a small circular story that starts and ends with a kiss.

3. SOUNDS ARE NOT ALL THERE IS TO LISTENING

Before I leave Weale's study of listening to electro-acoustic music, and in relation to the discussion that follows, let me cite an intriguing indication in his research, extrapolated from the subjects' various responses.

A consistent indication from Weale's results (Weale 2005) is that the title of a piece, when communicative to the general reader, can be assistive, as can the

‘dramaturgy’ of an accompanying text. Not only that, but a title may be ‘necessary’ for the listener to be able to progress further in his or her own ‘journey’ of associations, via a reverie that is apparently hastened by the combination of an epigrammatic verbal ‘stimulus’ and the referential sound world. Perhaps a title, and especially one that not only provides a *hint* of the maker’s intent but also invites the listener’s associations (that is, elicits a ‘personal’ journey on both sides), gives the listener permission to ‘keep going’ in whatever direction his or her responses may lead. Similarly, a text that introduces the composer’s subjective experience can chink open a door for the listener to have licence to use his or her own. The indications are that, used responsibly, words can help listening to access experience.

Yet in the case of electroacoustic music, my experience is that texts are often post-facto explanations of the composer’s motivation and (mostly) processes. At worst the business of writing the explanatory programme notes comes as a last-minute scramble in response to a plaintive call from the concert promoter. Perhaps a relative paucity of accompanying – let alone integral – contextualisation for sound-based works compared to that which often surrounds other contemporary arts reflects a lack of concern for the listener. But I think we need to articulate more clearly in order to stand a chance of being heard. Composers, artists and their commentators should not be averse to developing the vital paraphernalia of artistic ‘outreach’ – from programme notes, to visual imagery, to interviews, to talking about it to anyone who might listen. Moreover, and as I hope to show, the non-sonic (visual, written, spoken) narratives that surround a work are powerful when properly part of it although, as Weale also notes from his listener responses, a sparse text perhaps offers more leeway for the listener to pursue his or her own experience – as any song lyricist is only too aware.

3.1. Memories are made of this

each of us as listeners becomes a participant in the ongoing process of understanding the song. The song is personal because we’ve been asked or forced to fill in some of the meaning for ourselves. (Levitin 2008: 32)

By virtue of its compressed and partial images the song lyric’s narrative invites and allows for easy emotional identification – and on the way encourages an organising of our remembered experiences in response to the partial script.

Take one fresh and tender kiss
Add one stolen night of bliss
One girl, one boy
Some grief, some joy
Memories are made of this

Memories are Made of This, Terry Gilkyson, Richard Dehr and Frank Miller, 1955.

Sweet, sweet: too sweet. But whether you are familiar with the tune or not, such cloying sentiments are ample illustration of what we all know – that the winning combination of a catchy tune and a good song lyric provides quite enough material to do the job: here, to draw a line across imagined years, and between singer and listener.

Whatever memories *are* made of they also are partial, and in two senses of the word: the remembering individual’s subjectivity dictates the tenor of their content, and this content is always incomplete as a record of the past. But perfect recall is not the point: it doesn’t matter that memory is an unreliable narrator that skips in irrational non-linear fashion across time, often via sentimental – and unpredictable – fragments; it’s the travel itself that matters. Who cares where we start or where we are going; we are *moved* by a sugary love song; through the journey towards softened recollections rather than by a picture-perfect replay of that excruciating first date.

3.2. Brad Garton’s *Southside Silence* (1993)

Southside Silence is an unpretentious personal memoir that also invites several journeys of remembering from the listener.

The piece is here: www.music.columbia.edu/~brad/music (search for ‘Southside Silence’). On the face of it little more than a sketched montage of field recordings with some processing thrown in, *Southside Silence* has a sonic organisation that is, ostensibly extremely easy to chart. Yet sound is only part of the picture; there is also a text masquerading as an insubstantial programme note (it is nothing of the kind).

When I was in junior high school (middle school), I would occasionally have to wait for my mother or father to pick me up for a doctor’s or dentist’s appointment. In front of the school was a flagpole. A rope used to swing against the flagpole in the wind, producing a characteristic ringing sound. Standing in front of the school, with all the other kids inside doing school-like things, hearing that noise made me feel somehow alien and isolated. It wasn’t really a bad feeling, just sort of a detached melancholy state of mind. This feeling visits me often. The original title of this piece was ‘I wish I could stay in my room at home and life would just leave me alone for a while’, but that was a little long for my taste. (The programme notes to *Southside Silence* are also at www.music.columbia.edu/~brad/music.)

The first time I listened to this piece, quite a few years ago now, it somehow got under my skin. I have listened to it several times since though not recently until now and (with one exception) always alone and through headphones. Moreover, this kind of personal listening seems appropriate. On further reflection,

I hear it as a piece in which listening experience is both explicit and implicit, and somehow ‘nested’, in the narrative content. That is, the sonic material organised is to do with listening experience (in particular listening in different kinds of spaces), but the work’s subject is also the experience of remembered listening, which itself aligns to memories of specific feelings that do not correlate directly to the sounds other than being personal connections drawn by the maker/rememberer/narrator. And I think *Southside Silence* also achieves something specific in its organising of all this ‘listening experience’: well into the piece the ‘point of listening’ changes, with all the abrupt deftness of an author’s switch of ‘point of view’. To my ears, up to this point the piece has adopted a ‘third-person’ narrative of remembered time and place, but now shifts to a ‘first-person’ direct address that draws the listener inside the ‘frame’. Since the listener by this time will have started a parallel journey towards his or her own memories, this marks a juncture where two autoethnographic narratives are fused. And this fusion is achieved at the fall of a chord, as I will try to explain below.

Here is my listening to *Southside Silence*:

- A tapping, metallic sound. Random iterations. Isolated. Without context. I imagine that flag in the wind. I don’t imagine Brad standing there because I already have my own picture, thank you – and thanks to the sounds, which have a certain kind of familiarity. I listen to the landscape that is being created before my ears, and by them.
- Stormy weather fades in – wind, and rain? A series of understated consonant clusters emerging, ‘singing’, sustained, rolling around, quite loud. The outside world subsides but the tapping continues and soon the world, this time as birdsong and wind, returns. The sounds are of ‘here’ and of ‘there’, and my listening attention similarly comes and goes.
- Now obviously reverberated taps are more to the fore, the birdsong too. The consonant pitches very slowly disperse and disappear. A dog barks, the sound of a plane. Life goes on as a perversely gentle maelstrom, and for some reason I’m reminded of the opening line of a poem I love, by Ted Hughes: ‘A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket – And you listening’ (Hughes 1967). And I’m aware of myself, listening to this separate sonic world that documents not the past but the subjective remembering of some kind of time and place.
- Suddenly, I’m *in* that remembering. A moderately loud piano chord and a change of acoustic space dismisses the outside world. I am in a room where someone is already playing a series of bluesy chords, feeling a way from one sonority to another

without any particular sense of purpose or performance. Unheard. In solitude.

- After a while, low pitches, the return of the world ‘outside’, but the chords continue, repeated. The piano-related timbre from earlier in the piece returns; things are travelling backward. During a more overtly ‘orchestrated’ interlude with birds and wind, the tapping returns (when did it leave?). The exterior ambience resumes but intermittent piano chords remain below. The interior world fades, but remains below the surface.

In both his words and sounds (and the two are mutually dependent here) Garton places a value on subjectivity: his and the listener’s. In both sounds and words he is unafraid of being personal, even at the risk of appearing rather gauche. One can either squirm or admire him for it, and I choose to do the latter. *Southside Silence*’s double narrative is both musical and experiential in its materials, and organisation occurs in both domains. Sonically speaking, ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ sound environments easily become metaphors for exterior and interior experience. Listening to the sounds is easy, and their organisation is quite straightforward. It’s hard to believe that Garton’s seemingly unassuming essay on a childhood theme, and an adult emotion, doesn’t access a plethora of memories in each listening/reading individual, and these both visual and aural – and ultimately emotional: for me, the school playground with the diamond wire fence, the trees between school and home, and memories of childhood solitude. Your mileage will no doubt differ, but I challenge you not to have imagined something similar in your own way. Because it is *your way* of remembering, adopted and ‘presentified’ internally, on which representations – and imaginings – of experience rely.

Imagination *presentifies* ‘external’ experience. I see the butterfly light on the sweet pea; I close my eyes and recollectively imagine the same event. ... re-presentations may be exceedingly varied in form as memories, recollections, or fantasies and so on but in each of these they display themselves as *irreal*. It is not that irreality is lacking in vividness ... but the irreal presence is marked by ‘immanence’ as ‘mine’ and as ‘hidden’ from the other. (Ihde 2007: 119)

4. A DIRECT ADDRESS

I don’t think it’s too personal to tell you stories that relate to my experience of being in the world, providing that by doing so I tease out questions about how your experience might feel. But I don’t necessarily think that either of us will be able to articulate those experiences fully in words, images or even sounds – even to ourselves. At some point even the memories that contribute to our individual experience are unidentifiable as other than vague images or

feelings, even to us. And there is no survey questionnaire that can solve the conundrum of how to obtain a reliable written articulation of 'feeling', after that point when feeling overtakes verbalisation.

Yet art is its own answer: it relies on initiating non-verbal responses from such unknown regions. Although we may remain silent, listening, reading, or looking at a work of art, we may trust that we traverse somehow-similar experiential ground without needing to know, *exactly*, what each of us has in mind. Claude's way with light; Vermeer's way with interiors; Francis Bacon's way with surreal distortions – in different ways, and to different ends, each painter plays with a representation of perception that invites the viewer's comparison from experience. But of course landscape, domesticity or obliterated portraits are less the subject in these particular examples than that of, say, light as the passing of time; of the metaphors of interior space, or of the loss of self to existential terror – the places that these representations of perception lead to in imagination, as 're-presentified' by the individual spectator's experience, are remote from the time of the actual work's creation, the place or person depicted, and, often, from the artist's intent. I am not equipped to spend time on Art's philosophising on being-in-the-world, but making sense of being is what Art tells, and initiates within us. And that takes time. Even the experience of simply looking at a static art object is time-based: a painting is by no means experienced 'in an instant', or even from a single point of view. Indeed, studies of eye-tracking are not only fundamental to the design of visual objects such as web pages and advertising images but have been used to study how people look at art. There is even art that exploits our individual time-based appreciation of visual images: for example, Christien Meindertsma's *Makers & Spectators* (Meinderstma 2009). It takes time to get there, even if you cannot hear a sound. And it is interesting that in their choice of titles both Brad Garton and Christian Marclay (in the piece I am going to discuss next), explicitly direct the listener/spectator/reader towards thoughts of silence, a concept generally associated with having 'no sound' at all. Garton's is a sound-based work with text, Marclay's a visually perceived object, yet both understand that silence can be a reflective space (a time-occupying extent) for solitude and internalised sound.

4.1. Christian Marclay's *The Sound of Silence* (1988)

The potency of cultural objects as 'touchstones' of inarticulate, and to an extent collective, feeling is regularly exploited in sonic and other arts of appropriation. Art made from cultural objects is reliant on the assumption that everyone will likely find something – and bring something – to the conceptual party

through prior experience of this object in another, usually emotionally inflected, context. This kind of work not only allows for subjectivity but may indeed co-opt subjective response itself as subject matter, and as material to its organisation. Sound-based objects are powerful in this respect – even when silent. The major proportion of Christian Marclay's works, for instance, address our subjective response either to recorded sound or to cultural sound objects (by which I mean the commodified sound object: the tape, the record, the record sleeve...). But not all of his works are direct critiques of the commodification of art, and even those that are generally proceed from acknowledging listening of one kind or another:

In 1988 Marclay placed a life-sized photograph of the popular single 'The Sounds of Silence' by Simon and Garfunkel in a simple white frame, titling the work *The Sound of Silence*. At first glance it looks as though the record itself has been framed, but the viewer quickly realizes that it is a photograph – *only* a photograph – and therefore not capable of making sound. The compelling contradiction, Russell Ferguson points out, is that '*the photograph itself is silent, but when we look at it the familiar song starts up in our heads anyway, along with whatever memories or associations we hold along with it*'. ... [Marclay] states, 'A lot of my work is about how an image is expressive of sound, how sound is expressed visually'. (González, Gordon and Higgs 2005: 52)

Marclay's *Sound of Silence* is considered a significant and accessible work, reviews suggesting that people are generally touched by its effect. The premise is simple: as a *trompe l'oeil* it presents a simulacrum of a cultural object that itself has a pre-existing associated sonic identity, in both generic and specific terms. The generic technological artefact has the primary function of reproducing – of remembering – sound; the specific instance of that artefact represented is a song that is 'meaningful' to several generations of listeners. And in this case the photographic reproduction – a mere memory of the original object – performs at one remove exactly the same function as the original: it recreates a memory of sound. But the technology of music production is circumnavigated, and what music 'is' goes through an 'about face' re-evaluation as the viewer/listener 'activates' the work, *sans* anything but their own subjective, remembered experience in response to this visual stimulus, that reproduces a physical object, that in turn leads towards sound. Through this chain of objectifications the work accesses the subjective associations of the spectators, or 'listeners', rather than the other way around. This conceptual re-organisation of function and reception extends a line that commences from reliable shared associations (among them: a record = sound; this record = a familiar sound; this is a familiar sound from a 'collective' past) and continues onwards and backwards without knowing its destination. Every 'listener'

is different, and that is no matter, in fact it's the point: it is the drawing of the line, the action, that matters – and which is organised, as material. So indeed this is a time-based work, a piece of sound-based art that is built from both the various and varying trails of individual memory, and the collective cultural experience of those individuals.

I haven't experienced Marclay's work 'live', I have only seen a photograph of the photograph – and a recording is never the same as a performance. Still, for me those bland folk-pure voices (can you still hear them?) elicit a variety of achronological personal non sequiturs: the last slow dance at dreadful church discos, the guilty pleasure of still being moved by that first line... 'Hello, darkness, my old friend...', the glazed shine and square substantiality of the cardboard LP record sleeve, the privacy of record playing in my room, a vague memory of some teenage maudlin tears. Oh dear. The subjective past (the only past we think we know) travels out of vision and into sound, and is no longer out of mind. And though I can't hear you humming, I'm sure we do travel in similar directions. Marclay's simulacrum of that record we all think we know accesses a skein of individual experiential lines drawn from a collective response, even from the *internalised* sound associated with a cultural object.

4.2. I know you, you know me

If Marclay's work relies on a certain familiarity with the object (we think we 'know' it), how might this connection relate to sound-based works where the material is either on the one hand far more idiosyncratic to feel 'known' in this manner or, on the other, far too 'ordinary' to have associations peculiar to a particular time, place or culture? Can the everyday sound become 'iconic' in the same sense as the commodified object? Do listeners share sufficient experience to be able to reach across less culturally loaded narratives? Well, of course. Even the lines we draw in daily conversation are narratives that constantly spin from memory to the present, and back again – looping and drifting in an aimless *dérive*. For now we bump into each other's lives and may say 'have you ever visited...?' or 'do you know...?', as we draw comparisons in our gossip (the sharing of unsubstantiated views and facts). Later, half-formed or enigmatic thoughts may line up more clearly in memory, but for now we are concerned simply with our workaday comparison of then and now, or 'me then' and 'me now', or 'you' and 'me'.

- Strolling together across a leafy quad, a Venezuelan friend remarks on how – just sometimes, when the leaves sound this particular way and he closes his eyes – he's reminded of the country of his birth.
- (*As a child I'd lie on the grass with half-closed eyes against the sun, listening to the light, papery sound of the beech leaves in the breeze.*)

- Walking down a London street in humid weather an Australian friend jokes that the heat is a blessed release compared to the hotter months in Melbourne, and that even the trees sound cooler here.
- (*I once lived on a Canadian island where the wind whipped the firs into a frenzy that had – to me – an edge of desperation.*)
- Chatting in her Vancouver garden, a German-born friend says that as she gets older she misses the trees of the Black Forest more and more, and associates the forest sounds with the sound of 'home'.

In any moment we tell each other stories about ordinary lives that are in fact deeply held experiential narratives, organised and reorganised as the world changes and reforms about our consciousness. And sound is just one of many starting points. We reach each other through a constant exchange of these seemingly inconsequential snippets of mundane information, sent like memory-seeking missiles to locate points of contact, always at the risk of finding no response. But as listeners we try to provide one. Speak, listen, listen, speak. Have you felt the same? Behind such very ordinary passing human interactions as these we cement new connections or rewire others. Sharing experience is a mutual self-affirmation. We reaffirm our formative experiences as being worth attending to. And if the child is surely father to the man (or, to hear both points of view, mother to the woman), then self is formed by certain places, times and encounters now long gone. But this formation comes not only from their having happened but from their repeated return, sometimes at the slightest breath of wind in the trees. It's an everyday reorganisation of experience that's also worth attending to in compositional terms.

5. CONKERS (LISTENING OUT FOR ORGANISED EXPERIENCE)

the thread being spun now and the thread picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins. (Ingold 2007: 90)

After some years away from England, I have come back to live in an area very similar to that of my early childhood – that time when lived experience is somehow incised into memory. Last year, as a direct result of musing on these real encounters above, I recorded the wind in the trees. More importantly (I feel, without quite knowing why as yet), the listening point of every recording was from my own garden. I recorded not just the wind but a whole spring and summer of sound, from blustery April afternoons to long nights of trenchant rain, from the buzzing stillness of a hot July afternoon, to the rumble and crash of late summer storms. Owls,

twit-twoo-ing at each other a moment before the clock struck one a.m.; a clamour of rooks, alternately comic and horrifying; ducks making a clumsy descent with an even clumsier descant; and wood pigeons serenading perilously close to the microphone. At some point a fox contributed a ravenous complaint, and somewhere an unidentified nocturnal rodent bleated into the dark. And everywhere there was the flapping of wings, the whirring of insects, people, cars, horses passing, distant sirens, children in the street, rain – and wind. And yet, none of this sound material itself conveys of itself what I think I want to say, and at present I don't know where to start. I still have to decide on the subject matter. The sounds are probably tangential vehicles, and perhaps there are also words. But how do I articulate the *feeling* of those embedded, ordinary experiences that – like that piece of gravel when I grazed my six-year-old knee – have long since seeped into the flesh, to the point where they are now an unreachable subcutaneous stain? No longer a foreign body, but part of what I am. The sounds are interesting to me, but the subject remains elusive. I survey my collection and wait. And in case you still feel that composers should not talk about their working processes like this (it's embarrassing for the listeners) I'll let a visual artist, who is also a writer and composer, take the flack instead:

It takes research to discover the self evident: research conducted in the labyrinthine house of memory of one's own mind. As I sieved my past I found that the seeds of all that obsesses and concerns me in my art and life were all sown much earlier than I had guessed. The couplet which ends CV III and sums up the reveries engendered by a damp spreading mark upon the bedroom wall of my infancy, states the theme clearly,

Implicit in that stain right from the start

Was all I've since invented and called Art.

(Phillips 1992: 29)

Tom Phillips, a British artist whose work is characterised by its huge and prolific diversity, completed his 'CV' series of paintings-texts between 1986 and 1992 (reproductions can be viewed online at www.tomphillips.co.uk/portrait/cv). He is unashamed in his frequent 'subject matter', his self. Art becomes an auto-ethnographic journey: a personal narrative that explores an individual's life through memory and reflection, and extrapolates from this to wider concerns. And as Phillips points out, the 'CV' (or résumé) of our formative experiences is of far more lasting importance than what happens later on. It takes time to identify materials, which are neither paint nor sounds, and then to clarify their likely organisation. It is worth living with them, arranging them together, laying them out in ranks, or grouping them in disordered piles, collecting them in a dish to

see if they make more sense one way or another, watching them change from day to day as the ideas draw in.

So I close my eyes and feel the conkers in my hand, and I am there, in my mind. It was autumn, and a blustery day, and my first week at high school. We had followed a teacher along the path skirting the white-lined hockey pitch, past the trees, arriving at a shabby Edwardian house with rooms criss-crossed with oak panelling and shiny parquet floors.

Seated at wooden desks inscribed with ancient graffiti, we are handed black ink and heavy cartridge paper and are instructed on how to draw 'tree bark'. Dipping nibs in black ink we each make several small circles at random positions then, re-dipping as necessary, ink a series of parallel lines from top to bottom of the page. Encountering one of our circles we curve the line around it in a continuous motion, the final result produces the appearance of knotted wood.

But that's another world, now. That memory of my first school art lesson has stayed ever since, perhaps as a formative memory of effort, achievement and happy surprise. It's those feelings that matter. Now I can also interpret the memory as a satisfying introduction to both process and paraphernalia, and as an instructive experience of grappling with materials in the face of inexpert skills until finally something recognisable had been 'made', and by me. And the experience remains – there was so much effort and concentration in all that making: making the mark that flowed and travelled, making the ink last through the journey, making only partially controllable physical movements, making the effort to get the lines 'right', and failing more often than not.

I could recreate the harsh sound of the metal nib scratching across the paper, the clink of the pen against the bottle, the creaking desks, and even the murmuring of a class of eleven-year-old girls, concentrating hard. I could recreate the wind in the trees outside the Edwardian house, heard from inside, and the teacher's measured footsteps as she observed our work. You might get the gist of the place, as I place you there. But verisimilitude is not enough. Without at least a verbal description of why this depiction mattered, it would only be so much – in fact, probably too much – enigmatic sound. Then again, perhaps that may not itself entirely destroy the experience. Most listeners are unaware that Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence* was written in response to the assassination of J. F. Kennedy; are unconcerned as to whether Marclay's *Sound of Silence* is an invitation for serious reflection or simply an intriguing visual pun, and would gain at least something from *Southside Silence* as a purely sonic landscape.

Yet those of us working within the arts of sound should surely further consider the possible benefits

that such a listener-responsible approach to making communicative sound-based art might accrue. The maker who takes the time to consider and then articulate his or her subjective experience, rather than halting at a consideration of the sounds that incite it, is already considering experience as both material and (more unusual in the composed sonic arts) a rationale for organisational choices. And such organisation does not simply mean putting one thing after another in time. More fundamentally, perhaps, *starting* the creative process by acknowledging the potentially rich experience of the individual listener is 'helpful' in relation to the enduring success of the end product: as art that communicates via sound. Quite often, I'd suggest, that acknowledgement encourages the maker to 'do less' to the sound, or apparently so – and spend more time on leaving a door open for the listener to participate, from his or her own experience. That's not to say that sound-based art need be purely conceptual, or indeed accessible in a facile, populist manner. It can still be very 'difficult' indeed. But by regarding each of the above considerations makers might reach out to a wider audience, one whose experiences are not simply 'elicited' by chance connections but are in a very real sense 'composed in' to the work. In this respect, each listening becomes an autoethnographic journey made in response to a maker's autoethnographical response.

To organise is to place objects – things, thoughts, concepts, data, beans, colours, sounds, experiences – into a coherent arrangement. The process of organisation is defined not by linearity of purpose, nor by the nature of the objects chosen, but by the working towards a meaningful whole. What we are organising – it's immaterial. But I hope that it will mean something to both of us.

(Outside the wind blusters in the chestnuts, and I remember running down lanes with a hand outstretched to touch cow parsley, pink champions, and a host of other nameless grasses and leaves that were simply growing up with no concern for what their future might hold. The conkers clack in my hand as I let them fall back into the bowl.)

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