

Anthropology of Music Masterclass *** 26th - 29th of June *** Prof. Steven Feld

I Used to Hear You, But Now I Cannot: An Urbanization Case in Istanbul

Burcu Yaşin (MA student at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University)

This paper focuses on the impact of the recent urbanization policies on the soundscape and daily communication ways of the residents of the Sarıgöl neighbourhood in Gaziosmanpaşa district in Istanbul, by comparing their past and present sound environments. Despite its long history in the urban memory of the district and its highly talented musicians from Roma origin who have contributed to the entertainment sector of Istanbul for fifty years, since 2005 Sarıgöl has been facing urbanization mainly because of its unplanned settlement. However, beyond urban planning, there are also political and aesthetic dimensions, such as the drug sellers in the neighbourhood as well as Sarıgöl's wedding ceremonies and henn nights – mainly perceived as “noisy” and “non-aesthetic” by the public, since these are mostly practiced on the streets. On the one hand, these activities have negative effect on the reputation of the community but on the other hand, these are the elements that make the Romani people audible in the Gaziosmanpaşa district.

Therefore, similarly to Barry Truax's “acoustic community” definition, while Romani community constantly creates acoustic signals in order to “keep the community in touch”, at the same time, for the outsiders who hear or ear-witness the Romani community it creates a sonic sense of knowing them, as defined by Steven Feld. However, the recent urbanization policies not only made the community invisible in the urban memory of the district, but also inaudible.

Building on Barry Truax's “acoustic communication” and Steven Feld's “acoustemology” theories and literature about Romani people and Sarıgöl district, comparing Sarıgöl's sound environment before and after the urbanization based on empirical data obtained from the residents of the neighbourhood and the nearby areas, this paper will demonstrate how the soundscape of Sarıgöl shifted through the urbanization process and as the result, how it made the Romani community inaudible in the acoustic life of the district.

In the literature, the Romani community residing in Turkey have been mostly defined with the terms of sound and music (Duygulu, 2006; Girgin, 2015; Seeman, 2019). Similarly, in the semi-structured interviews, that were conducted with Roma based individuals (7 people) and residents of the nearby areas (7 people), the majority of the interviewees determine the Romani identity predominantly with the same terms as well. One Romani interviewee described the importance of sound as follows: “Music is a vital element for our everyday life and identity. This is not only music, but this is also how we communicate with each other. Even when we demonstrate our love to each other or our kids, we improvised little poems with music in 9/8 rhythm. Music is in our blood.” During the interviews, not only Romani people but also neighbors pointed out that the rapid urbanization has been shifting this “sounding (Titon, 2015) or acoustic community (Truax, 1984)” to inaudible one. Majority of the participants specified that before the urbanization process, they were capable of hearing the ceremonies, everyday life practices, and rehearsals of musicians of the Romani community. However, with the urban policies of the government, these sounds tail off from the soundscape of the district. In this respect, one non-Romani interviewee stated that “I used to hear their wedding ceremonies, rehearsals, as well as and even fights coming from the open windows. Now, these are fading away with the urbanization. They still arrange their wedding ceremonies on the streets but not as much as the old days.”

In addition to these, the results show that the sound was not only conveying information about Romani community to the outsiders but also functioned as a communication tool among the Romani individuals. For instance, Romani participants emphasized that before the urbanization, they did not use cell phone as effectively as today since they used to hear each other's sounds from the open windows and doors. According to one participant “Our windows and doors were always open especially during the summer time. That is why we never needed to call each other on the phone. We didn't have Whatsapp groups to communicate with each other. For instance, I would hear one of my neighbors having a conversation with the other one, and I would join them, then others would join too. After a while, there would be over 10 women chatting from window to window. But now everything has changed; it is not like the old days.”

To sum up, it can be said that the Romani community that lives in Sarıgöl represents an example of an acoustic community by claiming their existence through sound and music. However, the urbanization policies have a crucial impact on this community as they are becoming inaudible in the urban history of Gaziosmanpaşa neighborhood day by day. Besides the soundscape, the urbanization also affects the communication ways of this community.