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Sound Sources. Thoughts on the dynamic relationship of acoustic environment and the perception of music

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How are environmental sounds and soundings reflected in music? Do listeners used to a dense acoustic environment prefer acoustically dense styles of music? Is the development of musical styles like Techno, Industrial or Metal a reaction to the sounds of an industrial environment? In a nutshell: Is music perception influenced and shaped by multiple environmental sounds and soundings? These are the basic questions of my research project *Sound Sources*.

The idea for *Sound Sources* came about through my daily confrontation with material culture at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, where I work as curator for the Southeast Asia department. Preparing an exhibition on barkcloth, I became aware that every object in our collection contributes to its local soundscape and thus transports knowledge. In the case of bark cloth production in Poso, Sulawesi it is even documented that one can recognize the stage of production by the frequency and sound of the beating (Aragon 1990: 40). The soundscape of Oceania is also strongly characterized by the beats of barkcloth production which often comes together with the use of slit drums – a coincidence, maybe. This was the initial moment, where I started to think about the role of material culture in the local soundscape. Material culture thus plays a central role for the *Sound Sources* project as it will also be the starting point for an exhibition about the dynamics of acoustic environment and the perception of music at the Weltkulturen Museum.

The sounds of material culture characterize the local soundscape in the same way as the sounds of the ecosystem. At the same time material culture depends highly on the natural environment from which it is produced: e.g. on Flores bamboo zithers or flutes are a simple manipulation of the available resources. Instruments and objects alike are produced out of the natural environ-

¹ <https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de>

ment and contribute to the local soundscape. These sounds – charged with knowledge and meaning - constitute the primary hearing experience of the individuals living in this soundscape. This leads to the central question of the research project: Does the local soundscape influence individual audio and therefore music perception, and if it does so - to what extent? Based on this question I understand the individual (and constantly changing) soundscape as the starting point for acoustic knowledge and the basis of any kind of music perception and consequently also music production. Thus the dynamic between soundscape, man, music perception and production is a cyclic one.

To research this dynamic relationship, first it needs a theoretical approach for a classification of soundscapes. Starting from both, Murray R. Schafer's *Soundscape Studies* (2010) and Steven Feld's *Acoustemology* (2015), I define two aspects of soundscape which I understand as correlated, but for the sake of theoretical classification will be treated separately. These interacting spheres of the acoustic environment are based on the resources which produce the sounds and soundings involved: this is what I call the natural and the cultural soundscape. Sounds produced by the ecosystem – like waterfalls or birds singing – belong to the natural soundscape, while sounds produced by humans and their material culture – like barkcloth beating or striking the slit drum – belong to the cultural sphere. Yet, the distinction in a natural and cultural soundscape shall not refer to the nature-culture-divide. Rather, I understand them as interlocking and influencing each other. Also, I will discuss the need to add a third classificatory sphere: the 'social soundscape'. Hereby I mean specific soundscapes of different social strata or scenes within one major culture – especially in urban contexts.

The theoretical part of *Sound Sources* will be supported by case studies from Indonesia, Oceania and Europe. One example will be Bamboo Metal from Bandung in Western Java, where traditional bamboo instruments are combined with Metal music referencing the soundscape experienced. Contemporary music from Western Europe is also of large interest - like the *musique concrète* or *musique acousmatique*, in which recorded sounds are manipulated to create new musical experiences. I will explore how these examples possibly refer to the soundscapes involved and thereby create (trans)local soundscapes. As, for example, *musique concrète* is a predecessor of today's sampling culture and electronic music.

As soundscapes are experienced very individually I will additionally explore individual perceptions of soundscapes with theme-focused Interviews, and use these 'acoustic biographies' to

verify my theoretical approach. Interviews planned at this stage are with Kimung from the Metal band *Karinding Attack* from Bandung and with Ufitia Sagapolutele - a New Zealand based dancer and choreographer with Samoan background. The interviews will focus on (primary) hearing experiences and the perception of the individual soundscapes, and music preferences today.

My research project aims at combining case studies, interviews and objects from the Weltkulturen Museum's collection. It is also meant to lead to a future exhibition on the dynamic interaction of man, environment, sounds and music.

References:

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