

THE SIGHT OF SOUND: NOTES

Ellie Epp

Window sashes way up. Night traffic, the sound so visual, dark streaks.

Chrome

I heard a song that seemed a new kind of music. It was music I could see, two women singing an open vowel at an interval that made their two voices one broad grainy band I saw as chrome. There were touches of instruments as if behind or to the sides, marks with dark hooked shapes as if Arabic letters. The melodic line of the band of human texture would curve smoothly and familiarly but then narrow and flex into angles I didn't expect, smaller angles like quarter-tone jags. The line would thin and halt suspended in an unresolved-feeling way. It was like music of a civilization of the future, perfectly pleasing, as if the people who worked somewhere to create it belong to a culture that would suit me if I could find them.

I waited to hear who it was but it had been in the middle of one of those pop trains that segue into a lot of things I didn't want so I still don't know. Years later I was reading someone - I think it was Brian Eno but I can't find it now - who also used the word chrome to describe something he'd heard.

Near sleep a sudden noise

If there is a sudden noise when I'm falling asleep in the afternoon, just as I'm drifting away, it will sometimes strike me as a suddenly vivid visual pattern, a hammer blow as a bright field of yellow dots for instance. I wouldn't call that synaesthesia because it seems random rather than systematic. What it is, is evidence that what enters the head as hearing can propagate through to vision. Cortex is a vastly connected network not a set of separate rooms.

How I like to see music

Last night a random radio site gave me a piece I could see just exactly the way I like to see music: sheets of texture, a constant foreground I was looking through to grainy small movements behind it. Later the foreground broke up, juddered as if interacting with background.

I brought Louie the Niblock piece. We lay on the floor beside her fire and listened through it and then talked about it. At one point the porch door opened itself and cool air flowed in as if it were joining the sound.

We agreed it was charcoal grey. Her big speakers gave it a lot of detail. The way it looked to me was like abstract expressionist marks. There are no plants or animals or humans in it, it's cosmic. Louie said she could feel it rearranging her brain, pushing backward.

I couldn't focus the whole, always had to choose foreground or background or left or right, which often came to the same thing. I thought of watching landscape flowing below an airplane's wing, the way I can see it all but not remember it, in no way grasp it.

Am interested in how anyone else can experience it because I knew it was beyond me. At the same time I didn't feel it crafted by someone, more the way my films are, things made for other people to make something of.

Phill Niblock 2013 *Feedcorn ear*



Spatial clarity

We were on the stage in sofas, facing and surrounded by eighteen large speakers. I really was in a black space of transparent planes. A buzzing. A so beautiful buzzing, like nothing I've heard, like something I could hear gladly on and on. I would not be able to say much about what it was, but it reminded me of the Dollar Brand concert, something happened to the space as if its grain were being polished. I was on my axe-axis, cleft solar to throat with pain, axis pain, right pain, glorious. I was saying this is another level of art, this is opening knowledge on another scale, where am I, aching with beauty and truth. Beyond myself.

What was it - tissues moving at depths, ethereal they said. No. Not at all ethereal, transparent but so strong, like sheets of rock seen by a god with x-ray eyes. And then that stretched thread of the sound of a human instrument, like brass, like a bagpipe, but an edge of a shred of the sound drawn into a bright line, human concentration vanished to a point on the horizon.

I was physically so present in that space that I was wanting to turn my face to feel its air, bolt upright at the edge of my seat, cracked from throat to navel, turning my face in an occult north I wanted never to leave. The movement was like a tribute to the quality of the place I could honor more because some human had built or found it. In great pain, was it? The other kind of pain that is a joy.

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Peter replied finally, “visual clarity is an aspiration”. Visual clarity in music. Stimulating he said even just to remember or evoke in talking about it.

Peter Manning 1994 *The ghost of Eriboll* PODX system

Sounding image

Beethoven-like banged chords making mountains it seemed to me. Not desert mountains, thickly forested gigantic solid granite Alaskan mountains. Plinking percussion hits were the holes, which were stars. It took me a while to be all the way with it and then it was like when the chord/cloud water shapes later on bloom up from the lower frame line in OB Pier 5. His electronic background was long broad sweeping dark shapes: something moving, air, cloud, freighted wind, I didn’t know what, and the piano in front of it was building solid shapes with sharply lit massive stone slants as there are in a range.

I tend to think of sounds in terms of color or some more elusive sense of texture or tactile surface

the sounding image ... I can almost hear the whole piece at once or I imagine I can ... sometimes part of trying to get in touch with it is trying to draw it.

John Luther Adams 2010 *Four thousand holes*

Cursive styles

Voice lines. The Baroque’s airy freedom of line like smoke rising into still air from a cigarette. The lark rising in Strauss’s death song. Spem in allium the first time I heard it like Dante’s image of sparks arcing out of a stream. In Mozart’s duets two lines surging together the way two dolphins do.

In Ombra mai fu a stately ground with Jaroussky’s clear bright line floating out above it. Am thinking that beginning as a violinist helped his ease with the line, his intelligence in it. Jaroussky sings duets with flute or violin as an equal. That other countertenor has a Germanic sound too heavy for those lines. The Japanese boy, Mera, though his line is broader in its curves – are there terms for the parts of cursive styles? – is lovely in another way. His tone spreads into flanges – spreads and then narrows again like a eucalyptus leaf – into the metallic sound Delphine Galou has too. That gives it a otherworldly look as if in an animé drawn in a certain style.

Imagine these

An endless or long pouring and rasping of small seeds

The clapping of poplars

The pulsed singing of an airplane alone in the sky and miles away

Tenuous evocation

I'd need to find more about how it makes me come to attention when the music is simple enough to be seen and at the same time unusual enough in its detail to hold me. It's the same with writing, I'm thinking. What does that mean. When I say 'chrome' I seem to see chrome, not very well maybe, but still. Written or spoken, language evokes vision. So I can see sound – or should I say, see by means of sound – and then too – as above - I can see by means of language about sound.

There's a scene where Hardy describes the sounds of wind moving over the moor in a way that draws the whole landscape.

Gusts in innumerable series followed each other from the north-west, and when each one of them raced past the sound of its progress resolved into ... the general ricochet of the whole over pits and prominences ... the baritone buzz of the holly tree above them in pitch, a dwindling voice ... peculiar local sound a worn whisper, dry and papery, and it brushed so distinctly across the ear that, by the accustomed, the material minutiae in which it originated could be realized as by touch ... the mummied heath-bells of the past summer One inwardly saw the infinity of those combined multitudes; and perceived that each of the tiny trumpets was seized on, entered, scoured and emerged from by the wind

Thomas Hardy 1878 *The return of the native*

Listening

"The eyes of my eyes, the ears of my ears"

hlysnan, OE to pay attention to

It happens many times that I begin to write by describing what I hear. When I begin to write I'm attending to a conversation in my head – I'm listening, and so I also begin to hear what's around me.

Why listening is like other kinds of inward attention. Listening creates a silence, I mean a silent background to what I want to hear. When I'm recalling something I saw to describe it I create a silence to re-see it in.

I listen so closely with my eyes.

Hearing

When I was digging I heard the first blackbird of the year - the first I heard - but I didn't hear it, I listened to it after it was over. I heard the blackbird sing but it wasn't the blackbird singing until after I'd heard it. Then I didn't hear it again but I heard it back there in the accomplished - I saw it over on the other side of the garden a dark line eight or nine feet off the ground, over there, back there, at that much of a distance.

A small sound setting silence

Two weeks sound editing, four days working on the final mix. Early mornings, late nights. Community garden and what it means. Days, lights, birds, winds, beautiful autumn, color, color, air, earth. Water. It's a neighbourhood, community of persons and plants and lights and skies.

Location ambience textural – bird cheeps, faint locomotive throb, growl of warehouse motors. Foreground/background play in three layers: sync background, visual foreground and voices in the ear.

Microdecisions of sound-image relation. Pleasure of seeing the sound texture the image. *Fa fa la* says Mrs Hsu over the dry twists of daylily. Focus pulls slowly through fennel to a difficult resolution while Mrs Hsu's voice is being pulled up in volume to get her last mutter clear. The way Monty's voice clears when he says *clear*.



Herb garden plants and their industrial sounds, contour of the background warehouse motor following the contour of the edge of a leaf. Reflected light shaking on water; whispers, giggles, children's voices somewhere, *look at it look at it look at it*, a little girl's voice.

Voices as person-texture. Liz's head between dryish sunflower leaves comes up slowly and looks at us with a beautiful soft hit. Pause. Her mouth opens, Hi.

There shouldn't be muddle in the movement of attention from sound to picture, there should be clearings for something to come into, clearings afterwards to notice what you've noticed. Time for intelligence to gel what it has never noticed before.

Bounce sound forward or backward to propel something

You cut ahead of the beat, one or two frames because your ear is instantaneous and your eye takes three or four frames.

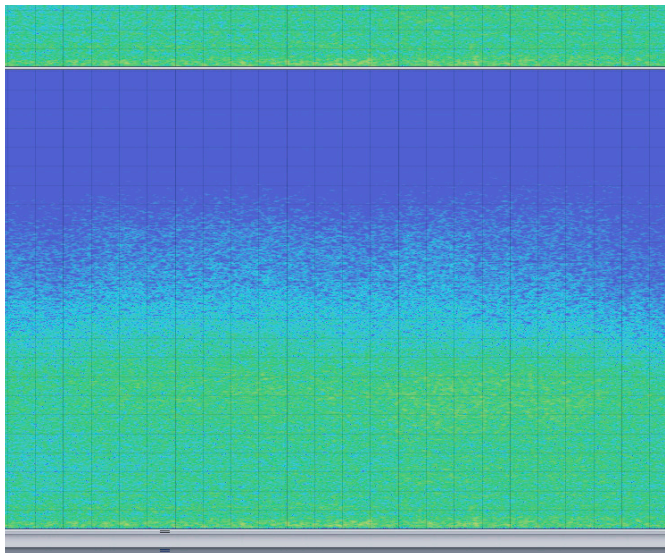
The tail end of a word over the cuts looked faster and better

"It holds."

Kale pan a forest of the small. Its even flow under the even flow of Michael's words. Time's pace and earth turning. We cross a space of open ground with no voice anymore. Then bye-bye waves the lettuce leaf and bump goes the frame onto the end of the show.

Frequency spectrum view

I tried a high pass filter on the bird and watched spectrum window strip out the bottom half of both channels. That was a beginning.



Watching the playhead slice through its first track in frequency spectrum view enthralled to see the music like and much more than and in other ways less than how I seem to see-feel it. I stared with nothing to say but full of intimation. I want to know the meaning of those large rosettes dissolved in open sky. How is that done. Other marks are directly transcribed drawings: the little base ticks like rule markings are tabla pats; the standing spears are larger drums; the strong parallel streaks are sitar notes seen bending; the thicker posts with a forward-dissolved edge are snare swats. Long dissolved humps of drone. Quite a lot of right-left difference, quite a lot of open space, clean. It begins for me as visible music and then as actually visible by this means is exquisite.

Al Gromer Khan 1996 Space hotel

The world never stops touching us

It can touch the inside as well as the outside of our bodies: when a helicopter rises over our heads, we feel ourselves touched in all our tissues. Some voices are felt as pleasant touches in the solar plexus. Other kinds of acoustic touch are so fast and sharp we don't feel them as touches and yet we hear by means of them because and only because they are touches. They literally communicate with us: they communicate energy and pattern. The tympanum is the window by which the smaller-scale patterns can get into us: a bottleneck. From that point on it is the wider nervous system that finds the patterns in the patterns.

Listen to the baby singing in her little bed in early morning light while her mother in her own bed holds her breath with pleasure at the sound.

Sensorium

An organism's perception as integrated whole.

In that old hotel with concrete walls the grey velvet quality of evening sound – velvet both sight and touch. Chanting at the end of the Zen sesshin, that was inside my chest so my own voice floated on it. Voices at Nyingma resonating in the midriff, motors on the street passing through it in dark ripples.

Pulse in my ear both heard and felt, one sensation.

What sound can know

We don't hear the fluttering passage of a raised dot on a moth's wing although a bat does. We do hear our friend's pleasure or the wetness of the street. Hearing a seagull fly over the roof we are also hearing the open air that allows its passage. In the particular balance of the seagull's cry with traffic noise we hear that it's early morning. When we hear a train at the crossing seven blocks away we are also hearing the presence of that reach of space around us.

Landscape

There is a point in making a piece where I suddenly get a sense of where I am and I can begin to sense the geography, the light and climate. I was really moving into a kind of landscape sensibility in music.

There are foreground events, events not so close to the ear, ones that become misty and indistinct and then occasionally a hint of something out of earshot. I like this idea of a field of sound that extends beyond our senses.

Brian Eno in Eric Tamm 1995 *Brian Eno: his music and the vertical color of sound*

Listeners should not perceive the piece as a sound object apart or a musical narrative ... Rather they should inhabit the time and sound like a place devoid of beginning and end. ... the experience of listening more like sitting in the same place as the wind and weather, the light and shadows slowly change.

John Luther Adams in Bernd Herzogenrath ed. 2012 *The farthest place*

Musicians talking about sound

In Erickson the way these composers talk about sound is as if transparent and ephemeral, very pleasing as evoked seeing.

blocs of sound coalesce and melt in slow procession, sometimes opening the dense broad-band texture toward an embedded polyphony

sound blocs like different kinds of rock, igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary

sound masses, juxtaposed, collide around us ... composed in densities and volumes of sound ... space in which objects slowly revolved in a kind of acoustic geometry.

surfaces and volumes of sound constructed in continuous transformation ... dense clouds ... the appearance of continuous evolution, like spirals of smoke or cloud shifts

background heard as a rich, rhythmized web ... a kind of composed haziness

Robert Erickson 1977 *The structure of music*

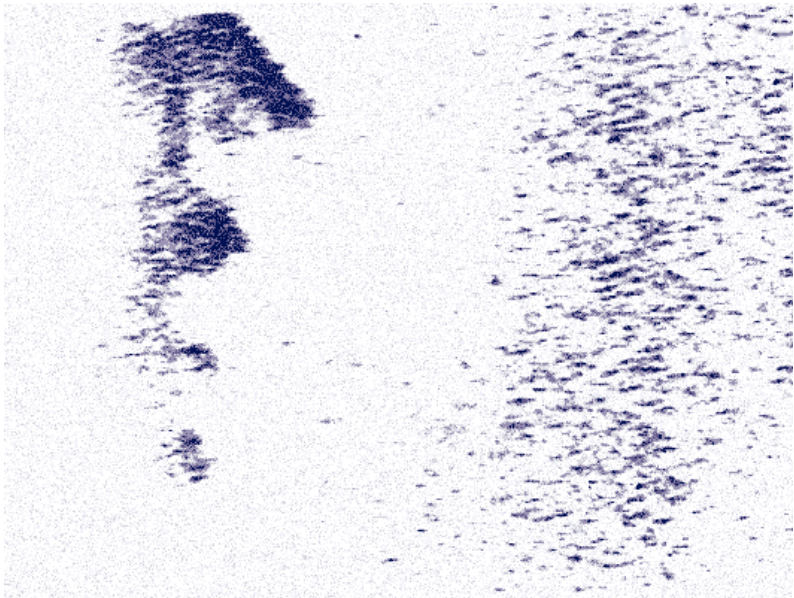
'Sounds'

Here's a composition that makes me hear, makes me seem to hear, somethings - 'sounds' - at locations. Take Peter Manning's concert. Located somethings - the air around me full of them, some arcing through, some standing as a quivering texture. There is a sense of being in a space that is and isn't the space of the hall. The quivering shivering somethings could be in the air of the hall but that bright small something fading over the horizon is miles away.

We say 'the sound', 'a sound'. That makes a noun of it, something we think of the way we think of objects. What if we think it as a verb: something is happening, something somewhere is sounding. So I'm saying here is an arrangement of acoustic acts imagined as acoustic objects some located in the real space around us and some in an imagined space with a different character.

Those are not exactly incommensurable spaces - depends what 'spaces' means. We imagine something when we talk about a space. Transparent structure. What I'm sort of thinking is that space is known with an abstract sense that is inherently multisensory. It's more muscular than we think. The sense of reaching with the eyes and ears.

The air listens in all its districts



the blue god
 she who listens
the sky listens
 its grain shifts

*rarefactions and compressions of an elastic medium
from each point percussions
points of origin and the standing spheres of their reach*

*a traveling intensity
the transport of a change*

*integrating property of a point in space
a field sums at any point*

the integrating sea

Seeing space, seeing air, seeing sound, seeing self

Steam at the mill dark grey and slow. Slow wisp from St Michael's tall chimney.

Faintly lit early sky. Steam wafting and drifting, dissolving as it rises, an ever-changing ethereally sensitive little region of notice in the motionless day of snow and bare trees.

Tonality of thoughts of air.

Air touching skin, air standing open in front of us, the sounds of wind in trees, drifting vapor or snow making visible what's there invisibly.

Movement yes, volatile space. I can be the white glide of that train of water vapour from the south.

"An ether in the air." - I thought of the motion of steam from a tall chimney and then of Tom as he lay in his bed seeing colored eddies behind the cars he heard passing in the street.

Cosmic winds. Cortical winds.

Soul is the etheric electromagnetic net! He seems to say it but not quite. There weren't Hubble images in 1943 so the whole vast articulate dancing of plasma wasn't as envisioned then. But he does say "The power to imagine

becomes one with the images when the dreamer touches upon celestial matter." What's imagined resembles the means by which it is imagined.

Gaston Bachelard 1943 *L'air et les songes*

Working with ProTools yesterday, sitting with machines handling images and sound. Then I dreamed I could touch places on a screen and have zoom up in me the different states of being there are - I could touch a region of the sound map with the cursor and become a time in all its feeling. I could touch something on the map of a relation with someone and instantly be there with them in that emotional region. What electronic editing is. Doing it all the time, this moment.

Composing

Composing in such a way that the 'sound', its shape in the brain and its shape in the intervening air are all sensed - its shape in the brain and the shapes that are standing around its name. A sort of composer who is aware of working with cortical dynamics. Composing for the ether of anyone's brain.

What's hard enough and yet winnable is the question, something that doesn't have to be dumb to succeed. The culture of that chromium music. In whatever medium. It isn't place as known though it's from place, from its forms. It's subtle and sinuous as air, faded to almost invisible so only the edges of its motion are still there. It's molecular and goes to edges made of light. It is formed in perception conscious self can't realize. It's not about though about will go on saying something somewhere. Not from but in, it's a use of a body. A wished death I think, of something solid - is it.

There she is, an angle of the head - the chin lifts.

Edges, edges.

It's maybe another relation to the real - gnostic in a way, it feels the fallenness of human custom. These many walking past who are so visibly none.

Is it tragic, this realm - yes it's mortal, which is tragic enough.

Is that it for now. Yes.

