

Documenting and archiving sound is an admirable undertaking; promoting sound as an art and cultural experience is an even more ambitious mission. What soundpocket does is, therefore, both admirable and ambitious to me, especially in Hong Kong. Unlike media such as text, photos and videos, sound is invisible, even though the imagination and associations it triggers can be very visual. Listening requires much more patience than looking or watching. A sound recording tends to entail unexpected content. As mentioned in the soundpocket Library Club's meeting in February when we discussed Mazen Kerbaj's 'Starry Night'¹: audio alone bears no foreknowledge of what is going to happen next, as opposed to a documentary film of the same event, in which the images would give audience expectation. In other words, without the visual, we are exposed to unknown possibilities when we listen. This also means the experience of listening is potentially exciting and boring – we don't really know whether the next second is a bomb explosion or another moment of silence.

Every physical object can be sonic and every living thing with functioning hearing can perceive sound – at least based on my humble understanding as a non-expert of sound. In short, sound is a vast subject. It is also a difficult subject to me. As a writer, I inevitably see sound in terms of words. The most conscious practice of listening I have been doing is listening to my interview recordings during transcription (whenever possible, I insist on doing word-for-word transcription to accurately reflect the interviewees' responses). My voice recorder sometimes captures nuances of sound or verbal expression I didn't grasp during the real-time conversation. Cantonese, in particular, is an animated language rich in interjections. Those seemingly meaningless 'aa¹', 'laa¹', 'gaa³', 'me¹' in fact reveal the speaker's conscious and unconscious emotions. They often tell me more about the speakers than their actual words. Close and repetitive listening of the recordings also allow me to get even more out of the interviewees in their absence. I started to appreciate audio as a precious means of documentation.

On the other hand, having been a theatre and dance critic, I've always asked: how can I capture sound and music in words? While I am able to describe abstract ideas in words, I can rarely put what I heard in a satisfactory description. If sound were to be seen as a language, it did not follow grammar. Some would consider our incapability to describe sound/music precisely the beauty of it. To me, such insecurity makes sound-related writing painfully tempting. One may argue, when it comes to archiving sound, words are irrelevant, as sound is best listened than described. Indeed. Yet, to document, it's important for the sound collector to provide a context of the recording, in spoken or written words. I am glad that soundpocket doesn't neglect this aspect.

One example is the time-sensitive 'The Umbrella Revolution – Field Recording Investigative Project'. The first-hand sound documentation includes the first-person narration of each sound collector's experience in midst of this unprecedented socio-political movement in Hong Kong. When the sound collector was aware of his subjectivity, the recording would be given another layer of meaning. This is not to say we have to agree with the collector's point of view; in fact, it gives one more angle to look at (listen to) the event, inviting dissimilar opinions and further discussions.

¹ Excerpt from a 40-minute improvisation recorded by Mazen Kerbaj in Beirut on the night of 16th/17th July 2006, in which Kerbaj's trumpet 'duets' with the sound of Israeli bombs outside.

However collective the experience is, listening is undeniably a personal experience. Even if the quality received is made identical (which I think impossible as we can never ensure our hearing capabilities are also identical), the perspectives of the listeners are never exactly the same.

Being at once collective and subjective, vast and specific, listening can be a challenging subject to teach. Should it begin with the philosophical point of view – ‘If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?’ When does sound become art? How complex would sound education get when music and language are involved? Is it advisable to cover the technical aspect of sound and how much is appropriate?

My doubts are in part answered by soundpocket’s newly launched self-learning ‘Listening & Sound Collecting – A Kit for Learning Together’, which encourages the public to start exploring sound the most instinctive way – hearing with our own ears. What makes this ‘self-learning’ kit even more worthwhile is the chance to also ‘learn together’. The interesting and meaningful exercises encourage sharing, while incorporating visual observation (finding the sources), interpretation (drawing soundmap), recording and performance. With sophisticated yet clear guidelines, the kit is simultaneously friendly to teachers, students and self-learners. For instance, the first section is divided into ‘Causal Listening’, ‘Semantic Listening’ and ‘Reduced Listening’, accompanied by the explanatory quotes of French composer Michel Chion. The kit’s all-encompassing objectives range from ‘enhancing sensitivity in creating’, ‘knowing yourself’ to ‘life education’. The broadness reflects soundpocket’s openness and belief in sound education.

The new Mentorship Program is soundpocket’s further effort in engaging people-based learning/sharing in sound education. Taiwan-based French sound artist Yannick Dauby was invited as the mentor to guide nine young Hong Kong sound artists in a series of activities between October and November in 2014, including a field-recording workshop in Hong Kong and an artist research trip in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. What makes the Mentorship Program distinctive is the opportunity for the Artist-Mentees to apply what they’d learnt in the field trip with their mentor in a subsequent two-day workshop with the public in March 2015. With the objectives to enhance participants’ listening ability, sensitivity and imaginative power, this public workshop consisted of activities that involved listening and field recording. Each team visited different areas throughout Hong Kong.

Partly an observer and partly a participant, I joined the outing in Sham Shui Po (the main activity of the workshop) led by Samson Cheung and Grace Choi. The pre-outing briefing took place inside soundpocket office ‘in case it’d be noisy outside’. I spared a thought to imagine the noisiness of the Hong Kong I usually heard... Hong Kong is the noisiest city; it is the most silent city. We hear so many types of sounds that we must give up listening to remind sane. Neither are we, city-dwellers, comfortable with complete silence. Such an antithesis makes sound art and education in Hong Kong meaningful but perhaps more difficult. Urban sounds reflect the way of life in the city, as Grace pointed out in the briefing. She reminded us to distinguish the sound source and the sound texture when describing sound. The trip encouraged me to surrender my usual ‘defence mechanism’ of being a careless recipient of sound in a noisy place and become an (overly) attentive listener.

The first task was an on-the-spot listening exercise near Apliu Street. We were free to choose a spot to listen with our eyes closed for five minutes. I was a bit apprehensive about standing still for five minutes at one of the busiest corners in Hong Kong, not to mention having my eyes closed. I finally found a spot at the back of an MTR exit outside a Taiwanese tea parlour. We were supposed to answer the questions ‘What is the quietest sound?’ and ‘What is the closest/ most distant sound?’, as well as ‘listen for a sound just as it becomes audible and follow it until it is barely perceptible’. I didn’t become a more perceptive listener with my eyes closed. Without the aid of vision, I lost my sense of distance – shop music felt more distant than it actually was. I also lost my sense of time – the five minutes felt quicker than I had expected.

The second task took place at the crossroads next to Pei Ho Street Municipal Services Building, where we needed to locate the sounds we heard. This time, we listened with our eyes wide open. This actually made me feel somehow less capable as a listener. I could hear car engine but realised it was a truck. I saw people at the fruit stall talking but the content was barely audible. Interestingly, amid the bustling streets, I noticed the soft horn of a van drawing pedestrians’ attention. The gentle sound of the hostile horn reflected the driver’s consideration. I heard the sounds of shoe soles brushing against the ground. The sounds were made by old people of different walking paces and gaits (perhaps resulted from rheumatism or degeneration). Now, I could see, as well as hear, the aging population in Sham Shui Po. I could also hear ethnic minority languages and unfamiliar Chinese dialects. These discoveries and discrepancies told me more about the community than vision alone.

After some field-recording individually, the last task required us to walk with earplugs, passing the quieter Shek Kip Mei, onto Garden Hill. Walking up the stairs on the hill, all I could hear was my own breath and footsteps. On the hill, we were asked to draw a sound map to depict the soundscape of the view below us. This at first seemed impossible until my mind quieted down. The skyline before me appeared stationery but I could ‘sense’ a multitude of activities. No, I didn’t ‘sense’; I heard! There were constant indistinguishable humming sounds. I also heard car horns and car engines afar. There were plane-like sounds, or were they machines inside factories? I didn’t have the vocabulary to describe those mechanical, rhythmic sounds.

The above exercises, though didn’t immediately make me a more sensitive listener, prompted me to contemplate sound anew. Living in a noisy city doesn’t make us sound conscious. It is actually healthy to be reminded how an unmindful listener I am through these exercises. It isn’t until then do I learn to open my ears more often. Sometimes, it’s not how much we hear but how we hear. The hearing then becomes listening.

On the other hand, we are at times better recipients of sound than we thought. By hindering one of senses (including hearing), we could actually hear more. The notion was experimented in soundpocket’s first learning group with the Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong (ADA) in 2015. Subsequent to the ‘Itchy Ears’ listening workshop, sound artists Wong Fuk-kuen and Samson Cheung collaborated with a hearing impaired participant and a visually impaired participant to create sonic artworks. By communicating with people with limited hearing or vision, the definition of listening is challenged and broadened.

I am impressed by soundpocket's spirit of exploration. To me, soundpocket is more than an organisation about sound art and education. It exhibits a bold attitude in engaging with the public in various ways. Yet, I hope to see more members of the general public to take part in these activities. While soundpocket's past activities constantly invites new sound collectors, it would be great if more non-artists could be involved in sound art. I suppose there are considerable ordinary people making art out of sound. They are probably unaware of the fact, but nevertheless deserve appreciation.

What exactly is our relationship with sound? I still wonder. I believe soundpocket doesn't have the answer either, fortunately. May this question persist so that soundpocket can carry on exploring different sound-related subjects.

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