

Why I Wrote *Listening to Places*

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ABSTRACT

The book Listening to Places (Void Gallery, 2022) contains exercises designed to encourage self-reflexive listening. These activities are predicated on platial thinking, a philosophy that asserts the importance of places as responsive contexts that shape, and are shaped by, our being-in-the-world. This belief weaves an ontology of being with an ethos that's literally grounded in the places we occupy, following the work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Tim Ingold. Despite the philosophical foundations, this is a practical handbook designed to aid musicians, composers, sound designers, field recordists, producers; anyone who wishes to enhance their experience of sound. These exercises are designed to facilitate workshops, soundwalks, and other activities. The paper expands on these themes and presents a concrete example from the book, together with plans for the continued development of the text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Last year my book *Listening to Places: Exercises Towards Environmental Composition* was published by Void Gallery in Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland [1]. This monograph presents 36 practical activities that form the basis for a self-reflexive listening practice. It fills a gap in the market for a practical guidebook targeted to a non-technical audience. The primary goal is to help readers develop appreciations of sounds and their relationships to places by highlighting the importance of *platial thinking* (“platial” rhymes with “glacial”). This philosophy asserts the importance of places as responsive contexts that shape, and are shaped by, our *being-in-the-world* (a phrase from Heidegger). This article will present an overview of the thinking that underpins this book, while explaining the context, development, and other practical matters.

2. DESIRE LINES

A path begins when one person pushes through overgrown grasses. Then comes another individual through the same field. They naturally tend to take the path most trodden, since there are fewer thorns to step on, fewer bushes to push aside. Eventually the path is worn bare, a common route through the landscape, a “desire line” as it’s poetically known. Later, stones will be laid to provide traction for wheels. If the track is popular enough, it be-

comes a road. Soon there will be tarmac and pavement, hedges and walls, lamp-posts and buildings. Travel to another country is invigorating because it foregrounds this process. We discover people similar to ourselves, but who live in a distinct culture, evolved in response to the particular places they inhabit. Perhaps in this society a veranda fronts each home, so that visitors can be greeted on the verge. Or perhaps the locals hang laundry on second-floor lines strung between houses, the sheets creating a sheltered convivial place for conversation. Or perhaps each evening the residents bring tables to the centre of the road, to play cards and drink red wine in the warm evenings of summer.

Every place is a social construct, an accumulation of the experiences and choices of others. As we walk through a place, we walk through its particular history. We make a place, as that place shapes us, in a mutual, entangled process. This is particularly true of those dedicated to field recording, an activity that requires active and reflective listening *in place*. It is my own practice of field recording and environmental composition that instigated these philosophical inquiries.

3. PLATIAL LISTENING

For centuries European culture has been dominated by a mode of spatial thinking that considers the visual sense as superior to others. This hierarchy is deeply embedded in our language. “I see what you mean” is a phrase linking vision to understanding. A “seer” is a wise person. In the seventeenth century this thinking was codified by René Descartes, who defined the world as built on a quantified, universal, rational *space*. Places, if considered at all, were relegated to secondary aggregations of qualities.

Yet this is not how we experience the world as individuals within its embrace. As Tim Ingold insists, our perception cannot be “sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways,” but rather must be considered as a whole [2]. Indeed, there exists an alternative to mainstream philosophy that recognises such embodied subjectivities. Edward Casey has traced this history from the ancient thinker Archytas; through the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; finally to Gaston Bachelard and contemporaries [3]. To describe this arc of thought, we need a new term. Though we have the adjective “spatial,” meaning “of or relating to space,” there’s no English word meaning “of or relating to place.” Thus, our very language biases us to certain

ways of thinking. I've previously proposed the neologism "platial" as an analogous term [4]. It might be considered an advantage that this is a near homophone for "palatial," a useful reminder that place is the palace of *being-in-the-world*. Platial thinking asserts the importance of places as responsive contexts that shape, and are shaped by, our presence. Here an ontology of being is grounded in a phenomenology of perception.

My practice of field recording and composition applies platial thinking to the auditory world, based on the premise that listening cannot be separated from the listener. As you develop skills in attentive listening, you learn more about the particular place you inhabit. This fact is understood to those of us who work in acoustic ecology, but is perhaps not widespread outside our domain, where the works of R. Murray Schafer, Hildegard Westerkamp, and others are unknown. Though in recent years awareness of the sonic domain has grown, receiving increased attention through books of analytic philosophy [5] and phenomenology [6], interviews with artists [7], musings on silence [8], etc. But a practical guide to listening itself remains lacking. How does one practice this esoteric art? How to develop an appreciation of sonic qualities?

4. CONTEXT AND PUBLICATION

For some time I've been compiling listening exercises for my own purposes. Techniques derive from my formal training as an audio engineer, my life as a community radio producer (1980s and 1990s), and studies of electro-acoustic music in Ireland and the UK. I've learned from peers at workshops across Canada; on soundwalks throughout Europe, at conferences, and so on. In a very real sense, this small book distills a lifetime of learning. A draft manuscript was complete before I discovered, to my surprise, that Schafer had already published a comprehensive series of lessons in the book *A Sound Education* [9]. Indeed, nine of his exercises were identical to those I was proposing. This coincidence can readily be explained. First, different active listeners can be expected to approach the nature of sound in similar ways. Second, some of my tutors might well have derived their lessons directly from Schafer, without making this connection clear to me at the time. In rewriting this text, I was walking a metaphorical desire line.

I initially believed that this historical precedent rendered my own project redundant. But when R. Murray Schafer passed in 2021, I decided that the best way to honour his trailblazing work was to follow in his path. Casual inquiries revealed that readers rarely explored his oeuvre beyond that landmark book *The Soundscape* [10]. This reinforced my decision to bring attention back to his other contributions. The catalyst came when Dublin artist David Beattie asked me to work on his Slowtime project, organised through Void Gallery in Derry. In August 2021 I led a public soundwalk around the Derry city walls. The gallery had an ongoing interest in field recording, and so proposed that I write a pamphlet to accompany this pro-

ject. This would be kept at the gallery alongside their other resources, which included practical equipment (digital audio recorders and headphones). This seemed a good time to propose my more substantial manuscript, which was taken up by all parties with enthusiasm.

My goal with *Listening to Places* was to reach people who had little understanding of the precepts and historical background that we who work in acoustic ecology know well. The contents were tuned to be free of jargon, developing any required language as part of the process. Each exercise was simple in itself, but formed an arc of practice. Schafer's own books were targeted primarily to his music students, but the scope here is wider, facilitating soundwalks, listening workshops, and composition. The first edition of 250 copies sold out almost immediately. This success confirmed the need for a practical workbook such as this. The next task will involve gathering feedback from readers, in preparation for an expanded edition. This paper is part of that process.

5. CONTENT

The first thirty exercises require only a notebook and pencil, plus dedicated time for attentive listening. Each page typically includes open-ended questions to focus listening. For example, "Exercise 6: Motion" is as follows:

Focus on one particular sound that is in motion. What can you determine about movement from the sound? Is it the sound that is in motion, or is the sound source in motion? What's the difference?

These short passages are followed by a response that's designed to be read only after attempting the exercise itself. These responses augment vocabulary and expand the scope to include topics in acoustics, philosophy, and even politics.

There is no easy answer, for this is a question of deep philosophical importance. Sometimes we associate a sound with the sound source. These can be termed distal impressions, because we perceive the sound as being further from us.

At other times we associate a sound with our hearing of that sound. This subjective experience, decoupled from the source, is a proximal impression, because we perceive the sound as being closely related to us.

The initial exercises address the fundamental topics of amplitude, frequency, repetition, and localisation. There are five entries on silence, two on noise, and three on the extended sensorium. The "sound museum" is used to describe disappearing sounds, while the "sound cradle"

addresses brand new sounds, those previously unheard in the world. Sociological and political topics are introduced, for example in the exercise “Noise and politics.” Though the bulk of the book contains “Listening Exercises,” the last six sections are “Recording Exercises.” These assume some method of recording and reproducing sound. The decision to include these was based on the fact that Void Gallery lends recorders to patrons, just as many of us may well have been on recording walks. This part of the book in particular will need improvement in any subsequent edition.

6. CONCLUSION

Listening to Places would not exist without a core ethos of ecological thinking. This was explicitly acknowledged in the Introduction to the book. It’s fitting to reproduce those lines here, as a way to conclude without foreclosing on future possibilities.

This book is for doers and dreamers, the practical and the philosophical. It’s for those who understand that the conventional ways of approaching our environment — both the built and natural environments — have failed. It’s for readers who recognise that our current path through the thickets is not leading us to Utopia.

This guidebook is for everyone who cares about the one all-encompassing place that we share and hold in trust, this planet we call home.

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7. REFERENCES

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