

# Power Struggles

## *The Politics of Composing with Sounds of Protest*

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### ABSTRACT

The author challenges perceptions of authorship within the practice of field recording, discussing sonic arts responses to political subject matter and examining the power dynamic among recordist/composer, subject and listener. He considers compositions drawing on recordings of protests as a medium to represent political content without recourse to language.

I have joined a number of politically motivated protests in places where I have lived and worked. Years spent in Barcelona meant I witnessed the birth of Los Indignados [1]. After moving to Belfast to commence a Ph.D., I participated in a “No Silence for Peace” rally during the “flag” riots of late 2012 [2] (Fig. 1). Working recently toward a community sound-art project in Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro [3], I was invited to join a protest against military occupation of the favela (Fig. 2).

In each of these locations I spent time gaining an understanding of some of the contextual issues and established personal connections strong enough to want to participate. However, as an outsider—a migrant, a newcomer, a visitor—to the communities demonstrating, in some senses I held an objective viewpoint. I was not part of any overtly activist group but rather was invited by friends or made aware of events through social media.

As a composer using field recordings as artistic material, I find my ear is drawn to the sound of demonstrations and their rich, powerful sonic messages. I have documented these through field recordings and interviews, shared some sounds online [4] and created compositions based on my experiences [5]. As a participant in such events who works artistically with the sounds, I note that my readings are multiple: I am both protestor and observer, my recordings both documentary and artistic. I am guided by an instinct that

there is something more to discover in participating, listening, recording and active engagement through sound.

A number of complications and quandaries present themselves with this type of activity: Disseminating recordings, composing with them, and the act of recording itself are all politically loaded. Potential problems range from cultural appropriation to exploiting the top-down role of the composer as a self-elected representative of the people. My motivations to compose are equally political and artistic—another problematic balance to strike. Can the field recordist and composer effect positive change with work of this nature? Could engagement with political action through sound alter elements of the cause in which it intervenes? Where does documentation end and artwork begin? And a primary question remains: why sound in isolation?

### SOUND AS INFORMATION

Peter Cusack's concept of sonic journalism is based on the notion that all sound, including nonspeech, transmits important information about places and events [6]. He acknowledges that, although language and visual images give basic information in arguably more explicit form than sound, field recordings “transmit a powerful sense of spatiality, atmosphere and timing. . . . They give a compelling impression of what it might actually be like to be there” [7].

In Cusack's *Sounds from Dangerous Places* [8], he engages with sites that have suffered major environmental damage or nuclear fallout or are located at the edges of military zones. He elaborates on the title, writing, “The danger is not necessarily to a short-term visitor, but to the people who live there or through the location's role in geo-political power structures” [9]. He documents as an informed outsider and presents the work in artistic form, in this case as raw field recordings on a CD for personal listening.

Cusack believes that listeners understand field recordings best when “the focus is on their original factual and emotional content, when they are valued for what they are rather than as source material for further work” [10]. This

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**Fig. 1.** Peace Rally in Belfast, 16 December 2012. (Photo © Tullis Rennie)

approach functions well when recordings are heard alongside illustrative images and texts, for example in the beautifully presented book that accompanies Cusack's CD.

If sonic artists prefer *not* to provide accompanying text, spoken commentary or images, it can be potentially difficult for a listening audience to understand the contextual detail held within many field recordings. Furthermore, the practice of field recording as an art form often distances recordists from the act of recording, separating them from authorial decision-making and editing processes. Unlike Cusack's work, the recordist's active agency within the field is not often taken into account and, in the case of overtly political causes, their connection (or disconnection) with the theme is unaddressed.

I suggest that composition could act as a way of transcending these difficulties, acting as a mediator and translator between field recording and the listening public. Composed sound here acts as a conduit, intended to make clear both the factual and emotional content surrounding the sound and acknowledging the recordist's connection to and interaction with the field and the field recording.

### SOCIO-SONIC COMPOSITION

When taking the sounds of protest into the studio I follow a "socio-sonic" approach to composition that combines ethnography, field recording and electroacoustic composition [11]. Recordings and the experiences gained making them are both consciously channeled for compositional use. The resulting works mix unprocessed recordings, interview ma-

terials and composed sounds derived from these. Spectromorphological [12] and sociopolitical properties are given equal importance with the aim to "maintain a creative and analytic relationship to both the materiality and sociality of sound" [13]. The abstracted sounds are intended to support the sociopolitical content of the original field recordings. The process extrapolates the contextual information learned by the recordist/composer while in the field and communicates it through musical means. Here, ethnographic field notes are heard as abstract sound, elaborating and augmenting the original recordings.

The readings of the events in question are subjective, but perhaps no more than when presenting edited field recordings, except that they are more explicit about the presence of the author. The act of field recording includes numerous choices, such as the event, location, time of day and position to record. Subsequent authorial decisions are made when selecting and editing recordings to present. Artists may splice sounds together to create a hyperreal synopsis of events—for example, in Christopher DeLaurenti's "overtly activist" *Protest Symphonies* [14]. Many recordists exert influence over their recordings through EQ, compression and other post-production techniques. The chosen means of public dissemination—whether presented on CD, online, in concert or in a gallery—also influences the listener.

A field recording is often unacknowledged as an equally strong product of the recordist's personality, experience and technique. Considering the inherent subjectivity of any recording, it seems a small and natural step that composed

sound materials could also be added to this process. If unprocessed field recordings and socio-sonic compositions are understood to have similar levels of authorship and subjectivity, both then are struggling with the problematic notion of cultural appropriation in their output. How can either party claim their sonic work is ethically sound? What is the distribution of power among artist, subject matter and listener?

## POWER DYNAMICS

Articulating composer intention and position is the most difficult task when combining politically charged sound with idiosyncratic original composition. Text and language are commonly used qualifiers, and while the written word may be seen to have fundamental flaws in communicating content, these are rarely discussed outside academia.

Sound composition is not such a widely shared vocabulary—it is arguably no more flawed than text, but much less familiar to a wider public. Being misinterpreted or simply causing offense are real possibilities for the composer but should not be a deterrent. Variations in the portrayals of public events are common occurrences—for example, the debates surrounding different journalistic accounts of the

same story form a part of daily democratic life and inform our reception and understanding of it.

What if we were to embrace the difficulty and friction that appear between field recordings and composers' interactions with them rather than battling, hiding or ignoring them? Composition might then act as a framework for these internal conflicts to coexist in parallel and begin to engage in dialogue. Artistic responses to field recordings could lead to new and different understandings of the events in question.

Audiences may be similarly undecided about their role within a protest or reception of a composition derived from recordings of it. Audiences are composed of equally multifaceted and independent-minded individuals, however, and sonic art might serve to offer reassurance in the light of their confusion rather than searching to provide concrete answers. Composition, in a move toward a "redistribution of creative agency" [15], could look to provide a fresh way to engage with ideas, a platform for debate, a pause for reflection. It could stress-test the boundaries where activism and observation, the subjective and the impartial intersect [16].

In "Listening, Meaning and Power," Michael Gallagher presents the audience's role as *making* rather than *receiving*



Fig. 2. Protest in Complexo da Maré, 14 April 2014. (Photo © Tullis Rennie)



meaning when in the act of listening [17]. He writes, “it may be helpful to recognize that listening is more ambiguous (in relation to meaning) and more ambivalent (in relation to power) than is commonly supposed” [18]. This is not to excuse or downplay an overtly political position any composer could take but does allow for the audience to make their own minds up about the artistic intentions of a sound work.

A compositional response to the sound of political protest has further advantages. Hearing these sounds disseminated across concert halls, domestic sound systems and laptop speakers could widen the engagement with the political message or debate in question. Any compositional response to current affairs will be *after* the heat of the moment, purely as a matter of logistics—that is, the time needed to compose. Therefore, there will be a re-interrogation of the issues potentially from a different angle, and simultaneously a reflexive look at the composers’ role in the field. The final composition will be a reflection of that individual’s interaction with the event, but the examples discussed here show value in

making that public. Music can amplify the voices shouting to be heard; composition can add contextual, emotional and personal response to those events; and sonic art can act as a lens and a mirror—to see our lives from a different perspective, and ourselves within that.

## CONCLUSION

If sound itself enacts power [19], as the act of listening [20] does equally, we should examine the ethical implications of making, presenting, composing and listening to sociopolitical field recordings. If the act of field recording itself is as politicized as much as the document it produces and the compositions it may inspire, we can conclude that sonic art presents a precarious but potent and valuable medium to represent and communicate political content without recourse to language. Sonic art is an approach in which we “understand ourselves to be part of its soundscape, not at its centre but simultaneous with it” [21].

## References and Notes

- Also known as the “15-M” movement, a broad-based protest not affiliated with any traditional political party, demanding radical change in Spanish politics.
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- Som Da Maré* (2014) was a participatory project bringing together the creative energy of a group of inhabitants from a cluster of favelas in Maré, Rio de Janeiro. Four months of workshops and fieldwork formed the basis of two cultural interventions through sonic arts: an exhibition in Museu da Maré and guided soundwalks in the south of Rio: <somdamare.wordpress.com> (accessed 26 May 2015).
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- Cusack [6] p. 26.
- Peter Cusack, *Sounds from Dangerous Places*, ReR Megacorp/Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, ReR PC3&4, 2012.
- Cusack [8].
- Cusack [6] p. 26.
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- “I fuse raw recordings of political struggle, battlefield audio, and oral testimonies into protest symphonies, which is a form of activist sound,” Christopher DeLaurenti, *Protest Symphonies* (2004, 2012, ongoing): <delarenti.net/protest/> (accessed 26 May 2015).
- Georgina Born, “On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, No. 1, 7–36 (2005).
- For example, *Manifest* [5], which is “at once an abstracted acousmatic treatment of the sound, whilst at the same time a real-life soundscape with edited field recordings. It contains the voices of people telling their own stories, supported and presented with my own compositional language or voice. I would say it is an acousmatic documentary or a composed (musical) anthropological aid. The difference between this piece and other potentially similar-sounding aural-mimetic acousmatic works is the applied and reflexive ethnographer’s approach, the socio-sonic methodology from fieldwork to final composition.” Rennie [11] p. 123.
- Michael Gallagher, “Listening, Meaning and Power,” in Carlyle and Lane [6] pp. 41–44.
- Gallagher [17] pp. 43–44.
- Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (London: MIT Press, 2009).
- Gallagher [17].
- Salomé Voegelin, “Collateral Damage,” *The Wire*, No. 364 (2014) p. 16.

Manuscript received 2 January 2015.

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