
Reviews

Listening to the Other

Stefan Östersjö

Leuven University Press, 2020, 224 pp.

Reviewed by: Kris Rodriguez

Stefan Östersjö is professor of musical performance at Luleå University of Technology, Piteå School of Music (Sweden), and associate researcher at the Orpheus Institute. In *Listening to the Other*, Östersjö challenges what it means to listen.

KEYWORDS soundscape, unorthodox musical composition, affordance theory, landscape quartet, listening to the other, low-fidelity recordings, artificial soundscape, anesthetization of landscape, modernized soundscapes, alternative use of stringed instruments, floating guitar

In *Listening to the Other*, Stefan Östersjö posits that much of a musician's ability to listen is shaped by musical instruments. In six evenly paced chapters, his theory is buttressed by compositional projects and collaborations that deconstruct our cultural understanding of how sound is produced and consumed. Östersjö's capacity to see beyond the traditional function of stringed instruments and utilize the perpetual musical output of the natural landscape is eccentric, yet compelling. Despite the book's musical intricacies, he manages to reduce complex themes and ideas that allow musicians and nonmusicians alike to explore the modernized soundscapes responsible for our collective musical dogma. Subverting established musical paradigms is a daunting task, but Östersjö does so effectively with cogent arguments that inspire a new direction of musical appreciation and imagination.

The journey begins on the streets of Hanoi in 2019. The bulk of this book was written during Östersjö's travels throughout Southeast Asia, the United States, and Europe; it is dotted with diary-like entries about the soundscapes he encounters in each country along the way. Throughout the book, he uses these detailed observations as primers for his work. For example, Östersjö's performance with a floating guitar is expertly recounted. He writes, "I typically set the instrument up by connecting long strings to several trees,

bringing the strings to tension by applying my body weight, thereby creating a little ecosystem of guitar-strings-tree-wind.” Through his precise writing I am able to picture it, but what does it sound like? Fortunately, *Listening* is accompanied by an accessible online musical repository of his work that immerses readers in Östersjö’s performance and collaborations. This delightful auditory surprise allows the reader to fully experience the author’s work, not just through the written word, but through the very medium itself. It was fascinating to hear what a violin floating on a river sounded like. A quick YouTube search led me to actual footage of Östersjö and his collaborators recording the riverbed violin.

Modernized soundscapes are the terminus a quo for this text and function as the foundation for how we listen. But it doesn’t stop there. Östersjö also ventures into our physiological responses to sound, the sociological components that are generationally inherited, as well as the historical context necessary to completely understand his thought process. Mediated sound has created a collective barrier that limits our recollection of sound and the act of listening itself. I recognized my own hindrance when reading Östersjö’s argument that “hearing comes first.” Prior to this, it had never occurred to me that our first experience with consuming sound starts in our mother’s womb, where we absorb the sounds of the external world through movement and touch. Equally as adventitious was the idea that our first experience with producing sound comes from the cry we emit at birth. These gentle reminders stir an awakening that pushes beyond the parameters of sound and listening, creating a bridge between our bodies and musical possibilities. As time goes on, our musical ear develops, and we begin to make distinctions that bifurcate the act of hearing from listening to evolve our tastes.

Östersjö’s affordance theory is at its zenith in understanding the sociological perspective of listening. He does this by excerpting the experiences of fellow musicians and their instruments, detailing the alternative ways the instrument can be used to create sound. Again, I am taken by how quickly my mind instinctively refused to consider these experimental endeavors as music. Throughout the book I experienced conflicting beliefs about what constitutes sound, entering a state of cognitive dissonance over what I was reading versus what I was listening to in the repository. It was a welcome challenge to my long-held beliefs. It’s easy to forget that sound is a socialized phenomenon and is responsible for shaping our attitudes toward the people and things that surround us. It works to entertain and distract, but also to communicate and connect with the outside world. Much of *Listening* is rooted in collaborative work with artists from all over the world. This amalgamation of human experience and musical talent permeates the book, providing new meaning to our traditions and modes of interdependence that catalyze a new appreciation for music and the human condition.

The complexity of Östersjö’s work is supported throughout the text with historical evidence that provides context for his musings. Advancements in technology have streamlined the creation of music. *Listening to the Other* counters this approach by reimagining what the alternative sounds of instruments and the natural world can create. The Landscape Quartet aimed to investigate this unconventional music-making process; the group’s members are Bennett Hogg, Matthew Sansom, Sabine Vogel, and Östersjö. Their

collaboration destabilizes the idea of modern technologically produced music. The sounds they create can't be cherry-picked from a premade selection of samples or loops; instead, the natural landscape is free to do as she will with the instruments she is provided. Whether that is a stringed instrument floating on a river, a rock rubbed against the body of a guitar, or the sound of an alternatively fingered flute, the range of what occurs with Östersjö's collaborative and solo work is ancestrally tied to the symbiosis between the musician, the instrument, and the world they inhabit. Hogg understands this tension, writing, "The representations of landscape, and in many respects the anesthetization of landscape in general, conspire to maintain the separation of culture and nature, of humans from the rest of the planet." The deliberate nature of the quartet functions to capture the sounds we tend to overlook, like a river current, leaves wrestling along a riverbed, or a wave crashing against the rocks. These affordances go beyond their natural purpose.

Listening to the Other explores the varied range of music production and human intervention. Östersjö executes a fascinating read, while subtly annihilating any preconceived notions of what sound is or could be. In our tech-centric society we have instant access to digital mainstream music and sound, but we lack the appreciation for the instruments, composers, and collaborations that make these productions possible. More alarming is our willingness to distance ourselves from the original sources of music—our bodies and the natural world around us. The material landscape has clouded our connection to such a degree that the mere idea of low-fidelity recordings or native soundscapes elude us. Try walking down a street without seeing someone with earphones in or watching a screen. Better yet, try it yourself. How much of the human experience is sanitized, or altogether replaced, by our predetermined playlist? Do we know that there are vendors on the street shouting at us to come in and buy something, can we hear the splash of a puddle as a car tire passes through it? Are we aware of the sound our feet make each time they hit the ground? Or the subsequent vibration that can be felt throughout the body? *Listening* attempts to understand this cultural phenomenon and challenges it with a blueprint for what sounds and the act of listening can truly be, forcing us to examine our own connection to the landscape and how others who live alongside us inadvertently collaborate with us to create the soundscapes we work so hard to ignore.

Östersjö's book is contemplative and often meditative in the art of sound; it explores themes that resonate beyond music production to capture a quiet snapshot of human behavior. The author warns that our conventional approach to listening and sound is alienating us from our authentic selves and producing a synthetic soundscape that disconnects us from our surroundings. *Listening to the Other* repairs that division with first-person accounts, collaborative compositions, and projects that make a compelling argument for rethinking sound. Östersjö isn't afraid to experiment and writes candidly about his disappointment at failed projects, but he never shies away from trying again. His dedication to his craft is evidenced by his continual effort to reimagine the ways in which he can blend human-made instruments with the natural world. Although I couldn't capture all the ways in which *Listening* works to evoke the musical imagination, there is plenty to discover. Equipped with scores, resources, and interviews, Östersjö will keep

you engaged and curious about the nature of what it means to listen, produce, and exist in an ever-evolving soundscape that is being drowned out by modern invention and technological advances. I highly recommend *Listening* to anyone who enjoys exploring new ways of thinking. Östersjö's conversational writing style makes it feel like you're sitting right alongside him on the riverbed, listening intently to his theories, as he adjusts the strings on the floating guitar, immersing us completely in his world.

Radio Revolten: 30 Days of Radio Art

Knut Aufermann, Helen Hahmann, Sarah Washington, Ralf Wendt
Spector Books, 2019, 356 pp.

Reviewed by: Lou Mallozzi

KEYWORDS radio art, transmission arts, performance, installation, community radio

“It is highly peculiar and requiring of interpretation that technology can accidentally be accompanied by ghosts.”

—Günther Stern, “Ghosts in the Radio,” 1930, originally published in *Anbruch*; as quoted by Ralf Wendt in *Radio Revolten: 30 Days of Radio Art*, p. 258.

Radio has been inescapably haunted and haunting since its inception. Its unnerving acousmatic anxiety, its role in propaganda, and its ephemeral electromagnetic fluidity have all contributed to its appeal to our curiosity and concern for all that is apparently beyond us. Artists, who have accompanied radio since its genesis, have long explored the physical and metaphysical attributes of transmission and have trod thick and contradictory paths through its noisy materiality, its insistent messaging, its monarchic territorialism, and its promise of non-hierarchical networking. It seems that nothing in radio inheres, yet it can traverse, transform, infuriate, engage, repulse, soothe, and sometimes even entertain, whether we like it or not. Any casting—broad-, narrow-, web-, etc.—is that which throws out a net hoping to catch . . . what? An audience? A discourse? The next thing to reject? The next thing to unify?

The ghosts became flesh in the fall of 2016 in Halle, Germany, at the second edition of the Radio Revolten Festival, which provided an open framework for a large international cadre of radio art experimenters. The festival's scope and ambition are uncontested, and the fact that the first edition took place ten years earlier is perhaps a testimony to the value of long fermentation periods to the bearing of full-bodied results.

The Radio Revolten Festival was curated by the team of Knut Aufermann, Anna Friz, Sarah Washington, Ralf Wendt, and Elisabeth Zimmermann and epicentered at Halle's highly active community radio station, Radio Corax. It presented 720 hours of radio art in 17 locations, which, according to the listings in the book's latter pages, comprised the work of 76 artists and groups with an additional 86 contributors (activists, performers,