

Walking through sound

David Toop

David Toop is not only a composer and sound curator, but also enjoys the reputation of being a most influential music journalist and author. His books "Rap Attack", "Ocean Of Sound" and "Exotica" are standard works in every library on contemporary music, and in his forthcoming "Haunted Weather" he explores the ways in which technology is altering sound and music. In his contribution to *receiver*, Toop focuses on wireless technologies and the idea of peripatetic music.

David Toop's site

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In 2000, I curated "Sonic Boom", an exhibition of sound art for the Hayward Gallery in London. One of the most popular exhibits was "Oasis 2000: Music for a Concrete Jungle", created by the German artist Christina Kubisch. To call this piece an exhibit is misleading. There was little to see other than the water stained concrete, the traffic rush and river flow of London's South Bank. Using magnetic induction cables and specially developed magnetic headphones, Kubisch had created an environment of sharp contrast in which visitors to Sonic Boom could wander through the open air of the Hayward's sculpture court, listening to the sounds of exotic animals and rural soundscapes in the dislocated context of the metropolis. Immediately positive audience reactions were evident from the smiles that spread across faces as people put on their headphones and started to walk. Surprise was a factor. Until the headphones were worn, there was no way to know that sounds were being transmitted, yet the feeling of being able to move in space, within an environment guided by the artist yet discovered and paced by the user, seemed the greatest source of pleasure.

Even in the few years since Sonic Boom, the potential for wireless technologies that allow this freedom of movement has become increasingly appealing. "I think wireless technology does suggest a real shift in notions of locality, in terms of spatial experience," says American sound artist Brandon LaBelle. "Mobile phones turn public and private inside out, making connectivity a fluid concept. Home may no longer be where the heart is."

Electricity liberated humans from darkness but fixed them in space; audio and visual recordings liberated humans from transience but fixed their experiences into frozen memories. Wireless technologies have proved just how willing people are to be disconnected from the umbilical cords that connect them physically to the power grid and to telephone networks.

Sonic City <http://civ.idc.cs.chalmers.se/projects/soniccity/>

As Brandon LaBelle suggests, this feeling of mobility is only part of the story. A new sense of personal engagement and active discovery presents itself. In Gothenberg, Sweden, the "Sonic City" project is exploring ways in which wireless devices can be

used to create electronic music in real time. A user pack, containing environmental and biometric sensors, a micro-controller and USB-MIDI converter, a small laptop computer running an interactive music programming environment, a stereo microphone and headphones, is fitted inside an adjustable jacket. This wearable studio can then map and modulate the wearer's passage through an urban environment.

Lalya Gaye, one of the developers of Sonic City, agrees that "personal mobile devices with networked computing and sensing capabilities" (in her interpretation of wireless technologies), can transform our attitude to the city.

"Probably, the main contribution of wireless technologies to sonic arts is not only the situating of creative interaction opportunities into everyday mobile settings," she says, "but also the enablement of new ones to emerge from those contexts."

In her view, the notion of surroundings as a setting can be amplified into "a resource for all kinds of aesthetic practices and expression, in short as an interface. If wireless devices became more modular and easily reconfigurable, this would lead to more radical forms of appropriation and to new creative uses."

Gaye imagines a future of environmental improvisations, created with "DIY semi-hacked devices made out of combined components from different, other wireless devices, subverting them for sonic creation the same way turntables were once diverted from their original use."

This may not be such a distant prospect. Musicians have subverted tools such as the record turntable, the digital sampler and the laptop computer, transforming them from their original purposes into instruments. Ringtones were the obvious starting point for the mobile phone as a creative device. In 2002, the Touch label released "Ringtones", a CD collection of sounds commissioned or collected from 99 artists and sources, ranging from Gilbert and George to sound recordist Doug Quin's tapes of arrow frog and baboon.

A number of composers were quick to realise the way in which mobile phones can introduce diverse and unpredictable sounds into public space. From simple beginnings, such as the Finnish Pavilion at Hanover Expo in 2000, where mobile phones were suspended in a tree shaped environment and programmed with birdsong ringtones, the projects have grown more complex. First performed at the Linz Ars Electronica Festival in 2001, Golan Levin's "Dialtones" (A Telesymphony, <http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/06/articles/index03.html>) was a composition for 200 mobile phones. These belonged to audience members, who registered their personal phone numbers into a database, received new ringtones and were assigned seats, then sat amongst the ensuing sound as two live performers created tone combinations using custom software.

"I don't expect many people to follow in the tracks of the Dialtones Telesymphony," Levin writes. "Too much hassle and way too expensive to commandeer a mobile network like that. But people may be able to have wireless jams together, with their phones communicating over infrared or bluetooth to a common timebase. The 21st century chamber music."

This clearly requires a technical advance stimulated by the vision of what might exist. "I definitely believe that wireless hand-held devices will soon have the capacity to act as musical systems," he says. "Not only in the capacity of wireless MIDI-like improv systems, but also as fully fledged recording studios. I imagine some kind of combination of MP3 recorder, Palm-based version of ProTools, and a phonelike ability to send tracks around. Could be fun."

Tim Cole, developer of the SSEYO Koan generative music system, now focussing on the Tao Group's polyphonic ringtone engine and the iSS software platform, is convinced that Levin's scenario is an imminent reality. "The sky is the limit in this area," he writes. "It all depends what the phone can do in terms of specification. One thing seems certain, and that is that specifications will continue to increase rapidly from here on in, especially as the drive to differentiate makes for an incredibly competitive market place. That means that mobile music making will be coming to a phone near you sooner than you think."

Cole sees the mobile phone as a "computer on a stick that just happens to be a communications device." With this shift of perception, we can see that mobile phones can become ubiquitous in electronic music in just the same way that laptop computers are now standard performance tools for musicians in many different genres. "Provided computers have key components in place," he writes, "for example, audio out and audio connectors, they become software configurable."

These imagined sonic capabilities of the technology may be fascinating, but for some of the artists using wireless devices, their current potential lies with the capacity to increase interactivity between performers and audience, better still to blur the distinction between producer and consumer. If the history of 20th century art and technology is a reasonable guide to the future, then wireless sound art will combine unexpected mutations of the sound producing capacities with innovative approaches to behaviour, perception and social use.

Performer and choreographer Sheron Wray believes that mobile phones can expand the audience for contemporary dance. "In my view, this has reached a threshold in terms of reaching new audiences," she says. "Textterritory v.2.3", her collaboration with digital artist Fleeta Siegel, uses mobile phone texting as an interactive element within the performance. At defined points, audience members are invited to text their responses to a multi-layered narrative. In turn, the performers improvise reactions to the computer collation of these texts. "As a format it is groundbreaking," Wray says. "The idea of people fidgeting within a theatre audience, much less exchanging ideas with their neighbouring patrons, is not one that is commonly thought of as desirable. The future is filled with young people who have different and evolving sensibilities."

Textterritory <http://www.textterritory.com/>

Urban Tapestries <http://www.urbantapestries.org>

This concept of free-floating, audience centred events is shared by Giles Lane, one of the developers of the London-based "Urban Tapestries" project. "The structure of the art world is a world in which you go to a place to receive an experience," Lane says. In the future, artists will still be important for their spark, he believes, but the balance will shift from a push model to a more engaged, multi-directional relationship.

Urban Tapestries is described as "an experimental location based wireless platform to allow users to access and author location-specific content (text, audio, pictures and movie)." Initially created by artists, the project rejects the template of conventional tourist guides in favour of public authoring informed by local knowledge and shared experience. How this will work in practice remains to be seen, yet there are clear links to current sound art, particularly in the sense of "leaving and annotating ephemeral traces of peoples' presence in the geography of the city." Artists who work with soundscapes – recordings of environmental sound either presented as documents in themselves or incorporated into musical compositions or installations – may deal with concerns ranging from conservation, noise control and urban planning to neglected historical narratives, personal memory and the immersive atmosphere of place.

Perhaps the highly charged issues raised by walking through sound can interlock with the promise of wireless technology: freedom to roam, a reaction against passive consumption, active discovery in habitual environments. "Maybe we have to locate the real opportunities to rethink locality itself as a consequence of wireless technology," says Brandon LaBelle. "It may allow us the chance to resituate 'place' away from a nostalgia for 'actual' experience, and toward a more dynamic notion of environment."

"Haunted Weather", Serpent's Tail Publishing
http://www.serpentstail.com/books/?_P=BOK1852428120

An interview with Toop
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/digital/interviews/toop.shtml>

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