

Ten Questions for a Listener

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"Reality itself has started to be understood as a kind of writing, which has to be decoded -- even as photographed images were themselves first compared to writing."

Susan Sontag, On Photography

Objective

The purpose of this exercise is to facilitate a discovery of new meanings in sounds that are normally taken for granted.

Activity

1. Find a location - indoors or out, public or private - with an interesting array of sounds. Sit down in this location on your own and listen for 30 minutes or more.
2. When you begin listening, try to gather and give attention to all of the sounds occurring around you - no matter how familiar or mundane.
3. Try to collect and remember in your mind as many of these sounds as you can. After a few minutes, focus your concentration on just one of the sounds. Try to select a sound that you think will be frequently heard.
4. For the remainder of the listening session your concentration will be directed primarily to this one sound.
5. Once you have selected your sound, you can begin responding to the sequence of questions that follow. Devote a minimum of 90 seconds to every question. Answers can be written in a bulleted format in the space provided. Dedicate more time to questions that relate more appropriately to your sound.

Ten Questions

1. Off the top of your head, what would you say to describe your sound? What is its most distinguishing characteristic?
2. During what time of the day or week would you normally hear your sound in this location?
3. Since you arrived in this location, how frequently have you heard your sound? Would you measure its frequency by the minute, second, or milli-second? Does its regularity follow a recognisable pattern?

4. How does your sound complement (or detract from) the other sounds in your environment?

5. What objects in your environment does your sound directly or indirectly identify? Are there objects and surfaces in your environment that your sound helps to illuminate or hide?

6. What social, geographical, or physical features of your environment could your sound symbolically represent?

7. Are you likely to encounter your sound in other environments? How identical are these environments to the one you are currently in?

8. Can your sound be associated with any memories from your past?

9. How has your sound changed since the time you first arrived?

10. Overall, what does your sound contribute to your experience of this environment? Does it have an influence on the mood or character of things around you?

Musical Commentary:

In the context of Acousmatic Music, composers often fail to consider the social background or imagery of the sounds they employ. The dominant tradition of musical abstraction, in fact, encourages the destruction of social referentiality altogether. Through exercises such as this one, it is hoped that composers of Acousmatic Music can develop a broader awareness of the sounds within reach of a field recorder. Microphones, after all, should not be kept immune from capturing the social context surrounding a desirable source-sound.

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