

Ecologies of Listening: Full Podcast Script

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(Note: this script was often paraphrased slightly for more natural speech, and it's not formatted for clear reading. Some transitional introductions of music and ideas added on the fly)

Listen:

https://soundcloud.com/sage-liem/ecologies-of-listening?si=a56816c1bf6b4991841675bf9c16adf0&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Out of Range

You've been listening to the music of Jana Winderen. Winderen is a Norwegian sound artist who focuses on sounds which are difficult for humans to access, including sounds from deep under water or ice, and sounds outside the dynamic and frequency range of human hearing. You might wonder what these sounds you've been hearing are. I'll let them play for a bit to let you imagine:

(let play)

So this is a piece called "Out of Range", which focuses on ultrasonic echolocation used by a variety of animals. Our hearing range is from around 20Hz to 20,000 Hz, although we tend to lose the upper range of that as we get older. These animals are operating entirely above that 20,000 Hz limit. So Winderen is recording these animals at very high sample rates so that she can slow and pitch them down to within our range of hearing.

And we can see here how this may be an important sonic perspective to have, from an ecological point of view. It's something that is lost to us—these imperceptible ways in which organisms are able to sense the world around them and communicate with one another.

Winderen's work sort of falls into the field of soundscape ecology, which is concerned with the sonic relationships between agents in the environment. The soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause categorizes these as "biophony", "anthrophony", and "geophony". And Krause has this theory that species have sort of evolved to occupy a particular range of frequency within the soundscapes of the natural world, in order to be able to communicate and be heard, and in this case even to sense their surroundings. Winderen's work really highlights the diversity of sonic relationships that are happening all around us, by affording us access to these distinctly inhuman ways of relating to the world through sound.

And with soundscape ecology comes the kind of ideas of acoustic conservation, and the importance of preserving these sonic relationships. Even though we may not hear it, the effects of anthropogenic sound, anthrophony, can be very detrimental to habitats and impact the ability of animals to communicate and sense the world around them.

I'm going to zoom out for a bit to talk about why this podcast exists. I'm framing this discussion within a kind of ecological crisis of listening within late capitalism, characterized by the kind of cultural hegemony of media platforms which we can observe in our relationships with social media, TV, and music streaming, which are always becoming more and more all-encompassing, addictive, and immersive. And one trend we see with these media platforms is kind of emphasizing convenience and these algorithmically personalized experiences like customized playlists and recommendation algorithms. And that automation tends to reduce the capacity for us to consume critically, when media is fed to us by algorithms that tend to be optimized for the benefit of corporations.

I characterize this crisis as ecological for a couple of reasons; first that capitalism promotes these unsustainable and anthropocentric views on technological innovation and human exceptionalism, and secondly that the modes of listening enforced by these systems are really detrimental to our ability to listen for alternative perspectives through sound, something which I believe is critical to an ecological viewpoint.

So this Jana Winderen piece is kind of an introduction to the ways that sound can introduce alternative perspectives on the environment, in a very literal sense of allowing us to hear the inaudible parts of the natural world around us. We're going to move forward with some other music that I think addresses these ecological issues with the way music is distributed and consumed in the modern world, and brings forth alternative ecological frameworks and ideas for consideration. Thank you for listening!

Tahoutine

That was "Tahoultine" by Mdou Moctar, released on the record label Sahel Sounds. Sahel Sounds is the project of Christopher Kirkley, who traveled to the southern Sahara to get in contact with local musicians and make recordings. These recordings vary quite a lot, from stuff Kirkley recorded himself to random voice memos and recordings from people's personal collections. This is off of a compilation album called "Music from Saharan Cellphones", which is just what it says: music that Kirkley collected from people's personal mp3 libraries on their phones. And this presents this really interesting relationship to media in this part of the world, in which peer-to-peer file sharing between people's cell phones is a dominant way of sharing music. Like, computers and internet are not really an option in a lot of these places—you can't get a connection to be

streaming music 24/7. So these alternative economies of sound arise in really interesting and also super accessible ways.

- These alternatives kind of bring up an important point on the sustainability of streaming. Studies have shown that streaming media is actually pretty bad for the environment, by some accounts comparable or worse than the waste produced by physical media like CDs and vinyl. The people looking at this issue often suggest this kind of peer-to-peer sharing as an alternative to relying on the Internet and these huge data banks which use a ton of energy and resources to build and maintain. And reducing the number of devices out there definitely helps as well, so this kind of ground-level P2P sharing happening in the Saharan desert in some ways really puts forth a potential future for sustainability in music distribution.

- We're now going to hear a kind of foil to "Music from Saharan Cellphones", another release called "Field Recordings from the Sahel", which is described as "a nice companion piece to the musical work...an homage to the sounds that don't always find their ways onto records."

Side B

So that was just a snippet of this album, the full record runs a half hour on each side. And I think of it as a really nice way to remind us that music can't replace reality. We're so bombarded by more and more immersive media, with infinite internet radio stations and social media feeds, that it's nice to have this kind of listening that takes us out of that. None of this media exists in some kind of alternate media-verse; the reality of anything we hear always comes back to experiencing it in space and time. And what I think Sahel Sounds does really well is give us this awareness of the layers of mediation and spatial and cultural referencing that is really new and opposite to these super "immersive" approaches to music. Not that these field recordings aren't immersive, more that they are immersing us in the real context of the music rather than in the commercialized abstraction of, say a Spotify "mood mix".

With that I'm going to move onto another Sahel Sounds release, this one is a soundtrack to an exhibition called "Uchronia: The Unequivocal Interpretation of Reality". I'll leave it at that for now, and we'll talk about it a bit more after listening.

Uchronia excerpts

So "uchronia" is a word that's related to the genre of speculative fiction, basically referring to a reimagining of historical events leading to new speculative realities. The most mainstream example of this is probably steampunk, where the world is still dominated by steam power and all these alternate technologies exist which harness

steam instead of electricity. This album is framed as field recordings from an alternate reality in which the Malian emperor Abubakari II "discovered" the Americas, and what Bamako, the capital of Mali, might have become. "Uchronia" sort of builds on the approaches to field recording seen on the last album we heard, adding in these newer elements like electronic drums and synthesizers. It presents a kind of speculative blending of the mythology of the past and the reality of the present, creating these new ways of thinking about Bamako which are uniquely imaginative in their decolonial approach, allowing space within history and mythology for that which has been erased.

Bringing this to the conversation of environmentalism, I want to talk about an essay by Elvia Wilk called "Is Ornamenting Solar Panels a Crime?", which deals with the solarpunk movement of the early 2010s, which was originally described on Tumblr as a kind of retrofuturist utopian ideal of DIY tech and environmentalism with an Art Nouveau aesthetic, where people have taken technological innovation into their own hands, centering small businesses and independent craftsmanship. And what she draws attention to is the way that by speculating on and drawing on the cultural mythology of a past where technology was more accessible, solarpunk creates a vision of the future which is utopian without being frivolous. It's a vision that Wilk describes as "dislocative", deconstructing the kind of dominant idea that Western society leads the development of a sustainable world. And these developments we see like the peer-to-peer cell phone music sharing network in West Africa are a form of resistance in the face of this Western, anthropocentric idea of fixing the climate crisis. The solarpunk writer Adam Flynn writes that these kind of "dislocative" ideas found in speculative fiction arise not from looking to a future of innovation or looking nostalgically upon the past, but rather from looking at the potentialities which exist in the world already, particularly those which have been overlooked.

Chuqui Chinchay

That was Elysia Crampton's "Armor of Chuqui Chinchay", from her album *Spots y Escupitajo*. Elysia Crampton is an electronic musician of Aymara, or indigenous Andean, descent, and her music is this really crazy collage of sounds from all over the place. We have these rhythms found in Andean folk music, alongside these crunk, Southern hip hop samples, like the Lil Jon "Yeah", and then there's all this kind of crazy sci-fi sound design and kind of religious symbolism. There's a lot to unpack in Crampton's music, like how she describes her heritage through geology, and the abstruse, apocalyptic poetry that appears on many of her tracks, and I think that she presents really interesting and pertinent viewpoints which are unique to her perspective as an indigenous Aymara person. I wanted to focus on a couple of lines that draw a really interesting connection between personal histories, environmentalism, and the legacy of colonialism. I have to

preface this that Crampton is from California, and the album titling makes a lot of references to Northern CA and gold country, which is kind of where this metaphor begins. She talks about, quote "vortices of cruel vermilion, heavy liquefaction of oxidized event". Mercury is the source of the pigment vermilion, and is a major environmental hazard that Crampton uses as a kind of symbol of the ongoing ills of colonialism. She draws a connection between the colonial past of California and the Gold Rush, where mercury (the source of the pigment vermilion) was used in the gold mining process, and Bolivia, the ancestral home of the Aymara, where there's currently a big issue with mercury trade and lack of regulation.

Crampton talks about geology as really important to how she connects with her cultural history. We can see that in this kind of mineralogical way of thinking about colonialism, and also in how she talks about stone as important to geographical history and standing against the Spanish colonial powers. She describes the stones as her family and ancestors with which she shares in becoming.

So with this we can get a kind of idea of how Crampton expresses her ideas. It's often kind of shrouded in layers of symbolism and a lot of abstraction, yet it's still there and she's certainly not reluctant to discuss those ideas. I'm going to play another track off of her album *American Drift*, which introduces another important idea behind her work that I'll talk about in a moment. This is "Petrichrist".

Petrichrist

According to Crampton, this track is based on driving up Mount Shenandoah in her Ford Ranger. Crampton was living in Virginia at the time and I think trying to navigate the histories of the people of Virginia and the land itself. It's been described as "an encounter between mountain and vehicle, interactions of non-human agents touching one another in a worlding where all things have agency". This is a sort of abstract idea which I think ties to something Crampton talks about which is unique to Aymara ontology, the concept of *taypi*. As I understand it, this is a ritual setting where many disparate and opposing elements of existence can sort of come together into a constructive, regenerative event. Crampton discusses this in terms of how she brings together these clashing elements of beauty and violence and all kinds of references to culture into a single work that kind of transforms its elements, and I think that the way she describes this encounter between agents in the environments is also sort of getting at the agency of things and capacity for transformation within this concept of *taypi*. And that anti-anthropocentric viewpoint of the environment having agency is something really critical that we see in a lot of Indigenous thought that's important to bring to this conversation, and Crampton does that in a really unique way.

Seltakvedne

You just heard "Seltakvedne, rull etter Hans Selland", by Knut Hamre, off of his 2019 album *Slåttar frå Granvin*, or "Fiddle Tunes from Granvin", a municipality in the Hardanger district in southwestern Norway. Hamre plays a traditional instrument native to the region called the Hardanger fiddle, which is similar to a fiddle with additional resonating strings.

On *Slåttar frå Granvin*, which I'll let play in the background as I speak, Hamre is playing in the Granvin style of fiddling. Many parishes within Hardanger have unique musical traditions which go back centuries, passed down from master to student, and Granvin is known for having a particularly rich musical history.

But what I'm concerned with right now is listening, and how Knut Hamre can help us think about new ways to listen. One thing you might notice in this music is that the tuning systems vary quite a lot from the equal temperament we're used to in popular music. There's also the noticeable absence of the forms we're familiar with—melodies and rhythms seem to repeat and shift quite unpredictably.

In many ways, we can trace this idiosyncrasy to the ways in which Hardanger fiddle music is so strongly embedded in the culture of very particular places. This isn't unique to Norwegian folk music. One might say the same thing about Chicago footwork, for example, which is a type of very fast and rhythmically irregular electronic music associated with certain street dance scenes. It's quite difficult to imagine oneself dancing to it without being emplaced within that local culture.

But the point I'm trying to get to here with the Hardanger fiddle is just how particular it is in its locality, and how long it has been that way. For better or for worse, there is no way to truly learn and understand what makes Granvin-style fiddling what it is except to be there.

Benedicte Maurseth, one of Hamre's students who is also making some very exciting music, wrote a book about Hamre's life and teachings, called *To Be Nothing*, where she demonstrates how these connections to place are inseparable from the music itself. I'm first going to play one of her tracks and then talk a bit more about what she has to say about Knut Hamre and Hardanger fiddling in general.

Og Fargane Skiftar på Fjorden

So, that was "og fargane skiftar på fjorden", by Benedicte Maurseth, and once again I'm going to let her album continue to play. We were talking about her book *To Be Nothing*, and I wanted to mention the way she brings up place before anything else. Before we

hear anything about music, we hear about the signs on the road, warning drivers of the dangerous conditions entering the Hardingfjord. We hear about the red and white pylons distinct to the region, and the little white houses once home to many fiddlers throughout history.

Maurseth intersperses all this with bits of the region's cultural past and her relationship to it, as well as the history of traditional Norwegian music, which has fallen in and out of favor throughout religious movements, wars, political conflict, and cultural change. And I think that her ear to the history of a place is really important, and that emphasis on place is represented in the music as well.

I'm particularly drawn to one passage in the book, where she writes, "Every lake, river, and waterfall, to say little of the endless rain, will eventually gush out into the Hardangerfjord, adding to its ceaseless flow." This flow, Maurseth says, is also the flow of ideas and knowledge and people, in and out through the fjord which makes Hardanger an important shipping route.

In the very globalized and networked world of today, these kind of long-term relationships to places often get kind of overlooked. These Norwegian folk musicians take great care in tracing the histories of songs in relation to people and styles and places, as evidenced in the way Hamre titles his music. The album is named simply in honor of where the music and his identity comes from, "fiddle music from Granvin", and every song names a composer or most notable player who is in the same way embedded in the cultural history of that place.

It's interesting that we started and ended in Norway, from Jana Winderen to Benedicte Maurseth by way of the southern Sahara, the Andes, and the United States. That was just an opportune coincidence, but it seems fitting in a way. I just want to wrap this up by saying thank you for listening. I hope that this offered at the very least some interesting music to listen to and maybe a broadened perspective on ecological approaches to sound. I do believe that sound has a unique capacity to transform our perspectives and let us hear across the boundaries which define our existence, and I hope that these recordings and ideas resonated with you.

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