

The Vespa

▼ Photo by Morten Rustad.

It was a typical autumn morning in London. The sky was pewter grey and the air heavy with the expectation of rain. The only sounds I could hear on the narrow residential street were in keeping with its demure Victorian brick terraces: front doors thudding shut; purposeful footsteps of men and women on their way to work; the “slick slick slick” of bicycle wheels moving along the damp tarmac. All was in its rightful place until, from behind me, the buzz of a Vespa scooter toppled my aural order. A Vespa scooter! For one glorious second, I was in Rome with its ochre-colored palazzos, dark cobblestoned streets, and fierce sunshine. Then, as the buzz trailed off into the distance, I remembered that scooter sales had recently exploded in London, a consequence of the exemption of two-wheeled vehicles from the city’s hefty congestion charge. “Mental note to self,” I thought, “erase Italian connotations of scooter noises. The Vespa is now just as much part of London’s soundscape as it is of Rome’s.”

You could call me, I suppose, a “sound hound,” a “collector of audio.” It’s a professional hazard when you work in radio. When I arrive at an interview location, I walk my ears around the place to identify what sounds I might record to give my listeners a sense of being there with me, to transport them out of their cars and kitchens to, for instance, Rome. Vespas, I realized that autumn morning, no longer work in the shorthand way they used to, at least for London listeners.

Hearing is the first sense we acquire as human beings — before even coming out of the womb. Hearing is also, we’re told, the last sense we lose before dying. Sound envelopes us every minute of our lives. There are individual sounds — the ring of a bell, for instance — so iconic that only a few seconds suffice for our brains to flash an image of the place that ring was from,



whether a school, church, or door.

Cities are a cacophony of sounds — cars, horns, voices, footsteps. Recording the aural cityscape is a challenge. How can one convey without using words the intimidation caused by the Stalinist buildings of Minsk, the pandemonium of a Manila shantytown or (and this is perhaps most challenging) the modern humdrum of a bureaucratic city like Brussels? My own moment of revelation came at the National Gallery in London. Not because of any painting, but thanks to the variety of its floor surfaces. The soles of my feet still remember the sensation of moving from parquet to marble to carpet. But my ears remember, too. Voices, footsteps, the London buses outside the window — each reverberated differently depending on the floor material. Does a given soundscape, I wonder, affect our artistic appreciation?

Hearing a place is a visceral experience: it is something we can all relate to without thinking why. Recording a person interacting with a space by talking in it and walking through it creates sounds that paint a vivid picture in the mind of a listener.

Consider the following radio sequence of just one minute from a documentary about land reform gone wrong in South Africa. The reporter walks into a ruined farmhouse. She describes what she sees and as she does, her voice bounces off the bare walls and her feet scrape against the rubble inside the house. She walks out of the house, and the echo is replaced by the deadened sound of an abandoned garden where she wades through brittle breaking leaves where there were once flowers and vegetable beds.

We share our streets and squares; we share their sound, too. Or perhaps more accurately, most of us still share their sound. Technology, the iPod being just one example, is already changing our relationship with the soundscape. It is a bittersweet irony that the very medium that proselytizes a community of listeners is experiencing a renaissance thanks to devices that shut people off from the sounds of their own cities. ■

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