Listening for landscape in the age of platformisation

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Abstract
In this text I explore the shifting interrelationship between listening and landscape in recent site-specific sound art & music performances, and critically reflect on how this relationship is conceived and articulated via particular assumptions about scale, duration and perspective. Rather than focusing on an analysis of works and their surroundings, I follow a rather more relational approach, taking as my departure point two examples of recent events set in historic sites in Greece, and pursuing two parallel narratives of peripatetic listening effected in, and through, these two spaces. At a time when listening is becoming a predominantly platform-based, networked activity with more symbolic than actual value, I suggest it is important to consider alternative curatorial and compositional practices that allow for more intimate modes of engagement with the audible environment.

At the turn of the 21st century, when the work of landscape theorists like Denis Cosgrove and Kenneth Olwig became a key critical reference for cross-disciplinary studies in the symbolic construction of landscape, the online turn was still a speculative realm. At the time the impact that broadband internet and social media would have on the production of space and the configuration of listening practices was hardly fathomable.

In the past twenty-five to thirty years, critical discourses on landscape have emerged from multiple angles, advocating methodologies beyond representation, exposing and criticizing the privileged role of vision in landscape studies, and encouraging participatory, practice-based and poetic explorations of landscape and environment. While such approaches have informed significant research within historical musicology, a whole array of other, perhaps more major cultural shifts, have also affected the ways in which music and sound interact with the concept of landscape. Such shifts include the turn towards online cultural production and consumption of musical artefacts, the subsequent turn from products to services, and the “sonic turn” in arts & humanities research.

While a significant body of geographical research has long been moving away from traditional representationalism, music and sound art have become increasingly reliant on symbolic representation, often in unprecedented ways. Discussion of soundscapes, for instance, has become tightly interconnected with online cartographic interfaces. Documentation and dissemination of environmental sound art, including field recordings, has become increasingly dependent on digital online content platforms. Environmental listening is no longer conceived as a primarily durational, time-based activity which takes up
space, or articulates space in specific ways. It is also a virtual trajectory, through spaces of densely visualised, timeless data: an abundance of clickable pins on a map; tracks on a never-ending playlist; links on an infinitely scrollable, permanent post feed.\textsuperscript{v}

I have written elsewhere on the critical impact of this shift for live music-making in particular, and on its relation to a broader, and quite dystopian reconfiguration of music as an immaterial, pervasive form of labour.\textsuperscript{vi} In the ensuing chapter, I take a somewhat more poetic approach, sparked by first-person experiences and reflections in two occasions of peripatetic, outdoor listening: during the final day of \textit{Tuned City: Ancient Messene}, a 3-day event of soundscape installations and performances in the ancient Greek town of Messene, and during Syros Sound Meetings, an annual program of group residencies & workshops for site-specific sound projects, in the medieval island settlement of Ano Syros. In allowing these two starkly different sites & occasions to resonate side-by-side, I hope to highlight questions of scale and perspective that might encourage curators and practitioners to recast the relationship between sound, site and landscape in more intimate, and perhaps more sustainable ways.

1. The well-tuned platform

Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn. [...] What was the barn like before it was photographed? [...] What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura.\textsuperscript{vii}

\textbf{Sunday, 3 June 2018, 10:30 am, Ancient Messene, Greece.}\n
Parched under the first sunny sky of a summer that would prove lethally hot for Greece and other Southern European countries, Australian sound theorist Douglas Kahn stands in the centre of an ancient outdoor amphitheatre, under a small tent, surrounded by ample supplies of plastic water bottles. Kahn is lecturing on energies and energy conservation in the arts. He is addressing an audience of no more than a handful of visitors, who barely reach double digits before the end of the talk. All of them have arrived by car. The listeners are covering themselves with every available fabric, from hats to towels and makeshift umbrellas, trying to make some form of shade while sitting in the sun-drenched marble steps of the ancient auditorium.

With shaded areas almost nowhere to be found on site, limited water supplies in the ancient city, and the nearest populated town only accessible by car, the experience is not exactly energy-efficient for the temporary visitors of this site. Kahn's talk is actually only one of many activities, dispersed in time and space across the ancient ruins, over the whole day. Audiences grow as the day progresses, moving in clusters from one place to the next, occasionally swarming under the few trees on this otherwise barren ancient site, to take advantage of their tiny shade.

At the end of the day, just as the sun begins to set, musicians and their dedicated audiences are faced with the ultimate challenge. Visitors are picked up in black SUVs, and dropped a few kilometers up the hill. They have to follow a
steep two-hour trail to the top of mount Ithome, to attend a thirty-minute electroacoustic trio performance by Nikos Veliotis, ILIOS & Steve Bates at 800m height, entitled “Black Seas Messene”. Completion of this challenge, in the form of arrival, is compulsory: no one can leave the trail halfway or return to the starting point on their own. Once they make it to the end, breathless audiences are ultimately more concerned with taking selfies against the stunning sunset background, and photographing the hilltop vista, than listening to the concert. The trio performance ends up being almost coincidental, providing a photo opportunity and a pause to catch a breath before everyone heads back downhill. Somewhat ironically, the performance is meant to reference the notion of collective hallucination – at least according to the program description:

Black Seas is a project about a weird listening. A listening that, as Mark Fisher describes when theorising the weird and the eerie via Lovecraft, brings two worlds together; the external and the internal. A weird listening is one that “…lies beyond standardised perception, cognition, and experience”. The music/sound of Black Seas always references some aspect of hallucination. It does not attempt to initiate hallucination, but rather refers to its rich and broad sonic character as described by those who hallucinate. It is now understood that non-pathological hallucination is not uncommon amongst a general population and can range from the banal to the sensational.xi

This is a statement made available to audiences via the Tuned City: Messene online program & catalogue, in advance of the event. Yet in real time, and almost independently of the performance’s sonic features, this “weird listening” situation becomes a pilgrimage to hyperreality. If anything, Mark Fisher would probably recognize this as a key symptom of capitalist realism.ix The two worlds brought together are not so much an “internal” and “external” one, but rather, two levels of reality: one is experienced immanently, physically and in real time (people playing music, others catching a breath or talking amongst themselves while hearing the music as a background, looking under the hill and attempting to photograph the view); the other is constructed symbolically as a transcendent, out-of-time mode of permanent representation (figures of people, landscapes, and performative acts “captured” and “immortalized” in photographs and videos). In this case, the symbolic, transcendent plane consistently “haunts” the immanent, physical one, to the extent of becoming its raison d’être, its sole cause of existence.

This performance, and the aforementioned events that preceded it, were the culmination of an intensive long weekend, during which the ancient city of Messene in Southern Greece became the temporary site for a diverse, exhaustive schedule of lectures, installations and performances, as part of Tuned City: Messene, co-curated by Carsten Stabenow and Manolis Manousakis.x Previously organized in ultra-modern, densely populated cities like Berlin, Tallinn and Brussels, this was the first time an event of this scale migrated to a small ancient site and took over its surroundings. As Stabenow explained in the accompanying program, the goal was to transform the ancient city into “a vast platform for artistic production and presentation […] in vital exchange with local and international audiences”.xi

“Platformization” is a term that only recently started entering arts research terminology, through the ongoing critical work carried out by Poell, Nieborg and others.xii It has originally been used to describe the process through which a
small number of major multinational companies such as Google and Facebook have become increasingly responsible for reconfiguring the way culture is produced, distributed and monetized. As the impact and ramifications of this concept are far reaching, I propose that the term might also be employed to describe a broader transition toward platform-oriented thinking in arts management. This thinking extends beyond the practices of online content management and delivery companies: it affects the ways in which curatorial decisions are made, and informs a massive shift of focus in the post-internet era, from the production process of live events per se, to the documentation and seemingly de-centralized online dissemination of these events in the form of user-generated content (primarily through social media posts and interactions).

While more live events appear to be taking place, in more locations and more frequently than ever before, this is not necessarily matched by more or better jobs and working conditions for those who perform the physical labour necessary for these events; nor does it imply better provisions or easier physical access for those that will experience the events first-hand. Instead, artists’ and technicians’ material labour is gradually de-valued, and the conditions of physical access are made harder and more demanding on audiences, with longer, more intensive programs, often accompanied by various forms of immaterial, pervasive, and unpaid labour.

Platformization has therefore arguably brought about such a paradigmatic turn, that “platform creation” has become an overarching new concept for arts management in the 21st century. This shift is both economic and aesthetic. Art curators are no longer thought of as the agents who bring together artistic approaches under a particular theme, within the space and time of an exhibition or event. Rather, through work that appears to transcend local and temporal boundaries, and becomes data the moment it takes place, they become perpetual facilitators to the creation and sustenance of a digital platform ecosystem.

What then, is one to make of the purported platformization of a small, sparsely populated Greek town and its neighboring ancient city ruins? How does this process affect the sensory configuration and symbolic representation of the Ancient Messene landscape? To transform Messene into a vast, translocal platform is not a mere turn of phrase, but a powerful metaphor with an explicitly transcendental outlook. A platform is an elevated surface on which people can stand (as in a viewing platform, or a train platform), but also a framework or system within which operations, and their execution, are made possible (as in a computing platform). The concept thus offers itself both to a human and a non-human perspective. This latter vantage point is ubiquitous and yet invisible: it does not match the perspective of any one subject on the site, be they performers, visitors or organizers. But it is not exactly a cartographer’s view either. It involves an open-ended concept of place as a dynamic, flexible and customisable locus where experiences may be archived and re-purposed, almost before they are even formed.

Paradoxically, despite Stabenow’s reference to vastness and international scale, site-specificity has a significant role to play in the process. When it comes to organizing sound events, a great outdoor location, just like an architecturally interesting interior, is conducive to the maximisation of added value: not only can such features attract bigger audiences (as, conversely, events can help steer
audience interest towards a specific site), but most importantly, they allow for maximum online content generation and data flow. The more a site figures in the promotion and marketing of a sound event, the more the metadata it can help accumulate. Platforms, in this context, become hybrid sites: part physical locations, part virtual aggregates.

There is a further aspect to this shift, which has scarcely been raised in discussions on site-specificity; this concerns scale, both temporal and spatial. Tuned City: Ancient Messene was subtitled “Listening Politics”; this was also the central theme of Day 1. Christos Carras, General Director at the Onassis Stegi, unpacked the term in the opening pages of the printed programme, bringing attention to the subversive, yet vulnerable qualities of sound in relation to given systems of order and power.

Tuned City in Ancient Messene is not about the past. It is about us, and it challenges us as receivers and producers of sound to rethink our way of being in the world ... inviting us to consider the potential of listening to and making sound and ... to rethink how we inhabit ancient sites in ways that are respectful and thought-provoking. It has been a long road to get there but we can hope that the sounds and ideas produced in this Tuned City will not fade out quickly.

More than a mix of aural & visual metaphors, this last phrase it is quite revealing as to the kind of role reserved for sound in events of this scale. Experiencing sound and ideas in real time is apparently of secondary importance; what matters, is that these leave behind a permanent, never-fading trace. This trace is probably to be found in the form of online digital content, and in the ceaseless cycle of user data & metadata that it may set in motion.

Two problems surface here: one concerns the relationship of such endeavors to the site which they temporarily inhabit. The other has to do with the resources needed, on a human level, to sustain this relationship. Vast and hugely ambitious as the endeavor for Tuned City: Ancient Messene may have been, its monumentality was by no means unique, and endeavors of this scale are hardly rare or isolated. Increasingly ephemeral yet monumental and centralized artistic production is being promoted via an openly accelerationist cultural institution agenda. In Greece alone, the Onassis Centre may boast the organization of dozens of events of similar scale in Athens and other regions on a regular year, but an increasing number of cultural foundations and smaller start-ups also contribute to an all-year-long production flow of large-scale, site-specific programs and multi-day festivals. In that light, the wish for sounds and ideas that “will not fade out quickly” acquires a different tone altogether: this is not so much a utopian quest to abolish time or vanquish decay. It is an acknowledgment of the speed with which the memory of such an event is likely to be erased, and a pointer to the inevitability of this erasure. At a time when listening is rapidly becoming “datafied” and attention gives way to memory disorder, such an effort to extend the duration of ideas and sonic events becomes as knowingly self-defeating as a Sisyphean climb uphill.

2. Sisyphus ascending

As must be clear, a place is already partially a poetic entity. Recordings can be made in a place, but there is no recording of a place.
Standing for a moment to collect his breath at the landing near the top of Ano Syros hill, composer Jordan Dykstra hold his recorder face-down, towards a cat that momentarily pauses to examine the mic from a little distance. A loud boat horn emerges from the port and is sustained for a few seconds, before fading away to the constant, quiet background of cicadas at close proximity. Dykstra slowly continues his uphill climb, continuing to record, until he reaches the peak of the hill. The boat has now left the port. A few musicians, some carrying empty cans of airhorns in their hands, others holding empty glass bottles, are slowly appearing from different parts of the hill, eventually gathering in the landing of the Old Jesuit Monastery. They are participants at the 2016 residency edition of Syros Sound Meetings, returning from a realization of Dykstra’s site-specific composition, *Inner Sound: Is Land A Voice*.

Dykstra is one of ten participants selected for the 2016 edition of the residency, following an annual international open call. The score has been composed a few days in advance of his travel to Greece, while the means of its realisation are decided in Ano Syros, over several days of recording and discussions with other participants. It eventually consists of the composer recording a walk downhill, and one uphill, between Ermoupolis and Ano Syros, on two separate days, during a 60-min interval before and after the scheduled arrival of the morning ferry. During his walk, inspired by the everyday rhythms of the settlement, where residents are required to walk up and down nearly 900 steps on a daily basis, participating musicians are positioning themselves individually, on various degrees of distance from his path up and downhill, and emitting a soft or louder sound from their airhorns or instruments. This provides a very sparse, intermittent kind of chorus, parts of which are audible in the recording, while others exert a rather more indirect influence, as atmospheric elements. The sound of a mandolin playing behind a thick stone wall, or that of bottles being softly blown at several metres’ distance from the recording, do not necessarily function as sonic markers; rather, they allow, in their presence, for an “active field recording” situation.

A few months later a final processed & edited version of this recording is self-released on the composer’s label, Editions Verde, as a CD accompanied by a number of photographs from the recording situation. The microphone is always visible, entering and occupying the foreground of the visible space like an alien object or shadow. As Dykstra explains in the accompanying notes:

Because wind was a factor on the top third of the mountain I gave myself the leeway of splicing the A/B track segments somewhere between 30” and 5’ [...]. Through these parameters I was very pleased to find serendipitous moments in the A/B track editing timeline. One such movement involved a recording of two children playing on a child’s toy motorbike in a small street [...] in Ano Syros [...]; juxtaposed immediately against the growly sounds of a group of “grown-up” motorcyclists by the pier, these two clips became at once conversational. Another enhanced instance of the field recording, such as the ferry’s horn from the sea and the air
Dykstra is also referring to listening politics here; but the perspective differs quite markedly from the one described in the previous section. I am not bringing the two references together in an effort to compare the two. This was a singular artwork, effected in a small-scale island residency, while Tuned City is a large-scale, multi-day project carried out in several European cities. I do however think it is beneficial to consider a perspective where these two approaches, are allowed to resonate differently when considered in parallel, much like the sounds of toy bikes or airhorns when spliced against those of motorcycles and ferries.

_Is Land a Voice_ suggests that a landscape is more than its so-called “landmark sounds”, but also, that there is always more, both temporally and spatially, to a site than what may be performed and recorded in the framework of an event. Barely audible, private, nearby sounds may affect the way we relate (or do not relate) with louder, distant, and very public ones. When an action is framed as site-specific, landscape is not only articulated in visible or audible terms; it is performed into being.

In early 2012, my partner and I launched Syros Sound Meetings as a series of site-specific group residencies and workshops in the Greek island of Syros. We did not have prior experience in this domain, nor were we entirely certain what direction we would want this endeavour to take, and for how long. We did, however, have in front of us a tempting proposition to make use of a relatively recently refurbished building, a guesthouse that was once part of a 17th-century old Jesuit monastery, for a few days every year, at a relatively low price.

Ano Syros is a peculiar place in itself. It is accessible in less than 5 minutes by car from the main island port, in one of Greece’s most well-populated islands, yet had been facing near desolation over the last decades. It consists of a labyrinthine medieval settlement on a rocky hill, with only three entry points and car parks on its edges, and otherwise only accessible on foot, via several hundreds of steep cobbled steps, carved out of the uneven rock. A hill otherwise known as the “Catholic hill”, in an otherwise Orthodox Christian island and country, primarily home to harsh salty winds, and over a dozen run-down medieval and renaissance monasteries and chapels. Under their vigilant windows, small, often derelict or barely inhabited homes stand squeezed into one another, with yards and terraces and alleys intricately intertwined, making the delineation between public and private space an unusual challenge.

Syros Sound Meetings started with “Landscape Scores” an intensive residency-workshop where a series of environmental scores were re-situated on the hill of Ano Syros and on nearby locations, after collective discussion that also led to the development of a few new pieces by local musicians. Soon thereafter, the idea of a joint residency emerged. Sounding Paths Residency, which has since been organized annually under a range of different thematic subtitles & foci, took the form of an open-call event for musicians and sound artists of different ages and backgrounds. Participants are invited to propose & develop individual projects, but they also live and work in the same space for an intensive period of around 10 days. Collaboration and feedback between artists is strongly encouraged, and results, almost unfailingly, in some degree of joint work towards the end of the residency. Curation consists, for a large part, in ensuring that participants will
produce site-invested, environmentally curious pieces that engage with the Ano Syros landscape in thoughtful ways. Another primary goal for each edition, however, is to assist in the formation of an ephemeral community of artists that, while broad and balanced enough in terms of individual interests, age, nationality, background and gender, will also find points of commonality that can spark and sustain dialogue, and lead to active and engaged conversations both between the artists and with the site.

Performances and “events” during the residency are mostly intimate occasions, which unfold in the liminal margins between private and public spaces, on courtyards, corridors, terraces, or on the street. They are rarely documented or communicated in their entirety, and sometimes may involve only an audience of one or two participants or interested bypassers. On one or two occasions, such performances have even been entirely private, leaving behind only playful traces for future residents. Áine O’Dwyer’s Poems for Play (2018), composed and partly realised during her participation at the 2017 edition of the residency as invited artist, is a case in point. Published in the ensuing year, the final project took the form of a book of poems in the style of verbal scores, and was subtitled “Thirty six scores composed for the Jesuit Monastery and its surrounding environment of Ano Syros, on the island of Syros, Greece, July 2017”. As the dedication-style subtitle implies, the scores are so specific to the place and time of the residency, that it would be hard, if not pointless, to transpose them elsewhere. This type of site-specificity, I would arguably refer to as site-contingency. It consists in the formation of deeply subjective bonds with a specific site, and with all that the site encompasses at a specific point in time. It thus aspires to the communication of highly personal, transient and provisional points of entry, rather than attempting to shape the site in the form of a definitive, objective document.

Between the monumental tuning of Ancient Messene and the intimate eavesdropping behind the Ano Syros walls, a fundamental question emerges: who performs landscape, and for whom? By extension, who is listening, and how? Interestingly, the community formed around the annual Syros Sound Meetings events has ended up becoming a much more long-lasting and wide-ranging formation than we could have ever envisaged. In the seven years since its launch, Syros Sound Meetings has ended up hosting over a hundred residency participants in total, from Greece, Cyprus, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Australia and Japan. It has fostered lasting friendships and collaborations among a growing, international community of artists, many of whom had not met before the residency, and have since developed ongoing collaborations over several years. In some ways, the wish for sounds that will not fade away quickly may have found an unlikely materialisation: if not in the context of a symbolic platform, then in the shape of a spontaneously formed human archive.

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Danae Stefanou is Associate Professor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki where she teaches courses on experimental music, critical studies and contemporary music historiography, and directs the AUTH Experimental and Improvised Music Ensembles and Critical Music Histories study group. In her own research, she examines experimental & improvised music histories and aesthetics from a variety of
ethnographic, archival and analytical perspectives, and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals (JRMA, JIMS, Musicae Scientiae) and edited volumes, including Contemporary Popular Music Studies (Springer, 2019), Made in Greece: Studies in Greek Popular Music (Routledge, 2018) and Cambridge Companion to Film Music (CUP, 2016). As an improviser, she regularly performs solo, in various ad-hoc collaborations, and as one half of the electroacoustic duo acte vide (with Yannis Kotsonis). Her releases include [herewith] for solo inside piano (Holotype, 2014), Create, a duo with guitarist Michalis Moschoutis (Coherent States, 2017), and a contribution (as acte vide) to the Anthology of Greek Experimental Electronic Music 1966-2016 (sub rosa, 2019). Her visceral, intensely tactile approach to the piano has been described as "real-time composition with no safety net" (mic.gr) and compared to the sound of electronic and noise musicians such as Russell Haswell, Kevin Drumm & Phill Niblock (The Quietus; Just Outside).

10 The event was organized in partnership with the Onassis Stegi – Athens, in the framework of the Interfaces (EU – Creative Europe) project.
xxi Stefanou, “Making noises in the factory without walls” (note iv).
xxii Poell et al., “The Platformization of Cultural Production” (note xii).
xxiii Christos Carras, Foreword to Tuned City: Ancient Messene (note xi), p. 5.
xxvii Organized by myself and Yannis Kotsonis since 2012, Syros Sound Meetings is an initiative for site-specific residencies and workshops with a strong focus on field recordings, improvisation and collective composition. Between 2017 and 2019, the residency also received support from the Onassis Stegi in the framework of Interfaces (Creative Europe). During this time, applications doubled and it was possible to cover the full cost of all participants’ accommodation and invited artists’ travel expenses, but the scale of the residency itself (number of participants, length of stay and daily schedule) has remained consistently small and independently determined.
xxix Dykstra, Is Land A Voice (note xxii)
xxxi Dykstra, Is Land A Voice (note xxiii)
xxvii Áine O’Dwyer, Poems for Play, London 2018, p. [i].

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