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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOUND

Martyn Hudson

To think about the sociology of sound we begin by rethinking some of the basic concepts that Adorno offered us in his philosophy and sociology of music. We then think about what sociology actually does and what is its 'work' before thinking about sound in and of itself and as something which helps us to understand social formations. Then there is a turn to the use of sounds in composition and instead of helping sociology to think about sound we think about sociology by 'thinking with' sound. In this we look specifically at the work of Luciano Berio, himself someone who tried to recompose the relationship between composition and sociology.

Adorno

To begin with: a sociology of *music* rather than sound or more specifically Adorno's sociology of music. It is the ghost of Schoenberg who haunts twentieth-century musical sociology. Literally so in the case of Theodor Adorno who would wake and in his 'dream notes' document how the composer had come to him in sleep (Adorno 2007: 11–12). Adorno's major work on the philosophy of music was written as a manifesto about advance and reaction in music – as Hullot-Kentor has said in his introduction to the work – with Schoenberg representing progress and Stravinsky the archaic and the superseded (Hullot-Kentor 2006: xix). The book was about documenting what Adorno called 'the power of the social totality' in 'such seemingly remote regions as that of music' (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 3). The darkness of the social totality of the twentieth century was one in which 'even questions of counterpoint bear witness to irreconcilable conflicts?' (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 5). Further, only the music of the 'avant-garde' truly bore witness to that darkness and negation – 'The truth of this music appears to reside in the organized absence of any meaning, by which it repudiates any meaning of organized society – if which it wants to know nothing – rather than it being capable on its own of any positive meaning. Under present conditions, music is constrained to determinate negation' (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 19). Music was simply another way in which the horror of the century was mediated.

Adorno's philosophy of music was complemented by sociological works in which he tried to delineate how the social totality was reflected or refracted through musical form. Adorno (1989) at the very beginning of this work describes music and society as having an integral relationship. In fact the very definition of musical sociology lies in understanding the relation between the production of music and the social organisation around it (1989: 1). Further, Adorno sees himself

as having the legislative power to define the ideological status of a piece of music in so far as it truly reflects the social totality and its darkness or not –

Music is not ideology pure and simple; it is ideological only insofar as it is a false consciousness. Accordingly, a sociology of music would have to set in at the fissures and fractures of what happens in it, unless these are attributable merely to the subjective inadequacy of the individual composer.

(Adorno 1989: 63)

The task then of a sociology of music is to describe ‘how society appears in music, how it can be read in its texture’ (1989: 218). The social determination of music (Adorno 1989: 223) is about understanding the ‘force of gravity of extant forms’ upon music (Adorno 1989: 93) and the description of ‘social structures’ and their ‘imprint on music’ (1989: 219). In other words, understanding music means understanding the relations that structure has deposited there and that the greatest music is that which reflects the ‘social totality’ in its clearest non-ideological form. Further, as Adorno says, it is about understanding the ‘the social complexion of music in its own interior’ (1989: 70).

If Adorno’s injunction against ‘ideological’ music is taken seriously then this leads us directly to the production of music and arts more generally which have a progressive social purpose. The whole of ‘relational aesthetics’ is built on this premise. As Bourriaud has said, this is ‘A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (1998: 113). The autonomy of the work of art is at once displaced by its display of social relations and then subordinated to social practices which totally de-centre that privileged, ‘private space’. The sociology of music since Adorno continues to think through the implications of his work including the study of social and specifically social class relations within music (Dowd 2005; Roy and Dowd 2010), the social structuring and powers and effects of music (DeNora 2000, 2003, 2011), music as a semiotic system (Van Leeuwen 1998, 2012) and music as a set of social relations, practices and mediations (Looseley 2006). The fact that music is ‘sign’ means that ‘Music can be seen as an abstract representation of social organization, as the geometry of social structure ... Music not only “represents” social relations and “signifies” ideologically crucial dichotomies, it also and simultaneously *enacts* and *rejoices* in them’ (Van Leeuwen 1998: 38).

But others have felt that music is profoundly challenging to ideas of representation and signification, particularly those of social relations (Nancy 2007). George Steiner has spoken of the ‘radical untranslatability’ of music (1997) whilst the composer Toru Takemitsu has said ‘When sounds are possessed by ideas instead of having their own identity, music suffers’ (Takemitsu 1997: 7). How far then can we translate between the dissonant and incommensurable epistemological worlds of sound and ‘its’ society? How far does this notation of the notations of music either just replicate or evade translation? Antoine Hennion’s work addresses these descriptions and notations:

Music holds a paradoxical, unstable position with regard to the question of mediation: its objects are dynamic, elusive, always in need of interpretation. This should prevent the study of musical productions from limiting itself to those material traces that, unlike in the visual arts, never amount to the work itself. That being said, the history of music has long involved the mobilisation of material intermediaries so that it too could aspire to the status of an autonomous reality, becoming a little more object and a little less mediation and producing closed works and authors akin to literature, whilst

also attracting a solvent public: all this thanks mainly to music's transformation into written form. The history of music is not that of an art of sound counterbalancing the evolution of the visual arts, but more accurately, the story of a continuing effort on the part of musicians to make their art more visual and stable.

(Hennion 2008: 178)

The question of the object, the material intermediary and the notation and its relation to fixity and stability is of course a question of lines. That denoting and 'thinking through' questions of notation, translation and materialities means elaborating the nature of lines and what Tim Ingold calls 'unbounded entities' (Ingold 2007).

The sociology of music, then, takes three broad forms. First, the social determination of music – the ways in which society produces music and imprints itself upon its form, performance and notation. Second, music as a set of discursive formations that can be read in order that we thereby understand the society that created it. Third, understanding the determining social powers of music itself to define and shape its society and social world. Can we therefore think of a sociology of sound in the same way? As a mediator of the social formation, as discursive productions, as sonorous objects of determination? Indeed we need to understand what sociology does and what it is for.

Sociology

Classical sociology (Weber elaborating on the piano as social instrumentation, Marx on Capital and why its society could have no epic, Durkheim on tribal music, Simmel on the sonority of the city) was ultimately concerned with what we might call the relations between social formations and social phenomena: between the abstract and the individual, local and specific. Much of sociology has concerned itself with explicating and elaborating on their multiple relations and the powers of macroscopic structures and microscopic processes. Tia DeNora, in her work on Adorno, has rejected the idea that music is simply a specific, localised emanation of abstract social structures. She thinks of music as having social powers in and of itself. She also suggests that music is something that we can use to 'think with' (DeNora 2003). She argues that sociological and anthropological practice and understanding can be enhanced by a closer engagement with aesthetics without using aesthetic objects as 'data'. Yet the very concept of the sociological object is itself problematic. 'Objects' we take to be entities of study and material forms that we observe and describe and that can frustrate or make possible the interpretations that we can extract from them (Cooper 2009). Varieties of constructionism have denied the reality of objective, factually constituted objects inevitably leading to the privileging of discourse whilst realist epistemologies have challenged this, most recently in forms of 'critical' and speculative realism (Pierides and Woodman 2012). But how can those objects be identified? As Geoff Cooper has recently asked – 'What are the objects of sociology' (Cooper 2009:1)?

We know that there is and has been a sociology of music but can sound itself be a sociological object? In one sense if we see music as performing certain kinds of social functions or being expressive of social collisions then seeing music as a 'sociological object' seems an intuitive result and a worthwhile pursuit. It makes little difference whether you see music as mediation of social structure, discursive formations or itself a power of determination – music is resolutely a sociological object. It is also a psychological and an anthropological object in so far as music is entangled with human 'interiors' and social 'practices'. Indeed, musicology itself is essentially concerned with discerning the sociological object of music. So can we then think of sound as a mediation of social structure, as discursive formation or as having powers of determination? And

what is it about sociological 'writing' that might make 'sound' intelligible? How far can be sociologically write up what we hear? And what does that sound actually 'mean' for our descriptions of society? Are we studying the sound for a clue to the social formation or the social formation for a clue to its sounds? Is the sound simply the docile object or container of meaning that we then use as an artefact or 'data' about the social world? Or do we just leave it, as does Jean-Luc Nancy, with a radical undecidability? That we simply listen and let the sound reverberate through our 'corps sonore', our corporeal sonorous bodies, rather than try and understand what it might mean, or signify or describe?

Sound

Let's attempt to answer those questions. So can we then think of sound as a mediation of social structure, as discursive formation or as having powers of determination? We here encounter a significant problem, that unlike music, sound is ubiquitous. It is a sensual aspect of being human. It is essentially, and again unlike music, a non-organised sonority on first encounter. For Brandon LaBelle:

Sound is already always mine and not mine – I cannot hold it for long, nor can I arrest all its itinerant energy. Sound is promiscuous. It exists as a network that teaches us how to belong, to find place, as well as how not to belong, to drift. To be out of place, and still to search for new connection, for proximity. Auditory knowledge is non-dualistic. It is based on empathy and divergence, allowing for careful understanding and deep involvement in the present while connecting to the dynamics of mediation, displacement, and virtuality.

(LaBelle 2010: xvii)

Sounds are phenomena in and of themselves. They are multiple and part of being in and of the world as Nancy notes above. In a simple way some sounds are of course structured by the social world and emanate from it. They can also discursively represent something to us. We hear the sound of a train, itself a product of social relationships, and we can imagine the train even if we do not see it. The sound is itself part of complex social discourses and cultures. But sounds are also part of nature, even though our responses to those sounds are cultural. We often think of the 'aesthetics' of bird song, even if those sonorities can only with reservation be perceived as 'art' or 'song' in human terms. But often sounds are dislocated from their origin, are recorded, de-contextualised, extra-territorialised in radically different and distant spaces from their genesis. They are traces of something previous, of 'dead logics' and often 'dead worlds' particularly when specific sounds are re-organised and re-structured into the new discursive formations of sound art (Hudson and Shaw 2015). In this then the sound is very clearly a sociological object. It comes from the social and natural world and can tell us about that world (as in field recordings, oral history, the sounds of machines, traditional words). But the sound does not have to signify as a sonorous object. As Nancy says, we receive sounds as part of being human, we do not need to ask for meaning or signification. And of course sound has its own social powers, to determine and to structure. In many ways, the syllables of our language structure our social identities, orality provides us with an index to who we are, the sounds of the natural world give depth to our engagement with existence. We do not just receive sound, we transmit it orally, physically and biologically, politically. Sound is part of the agonistic contestations of the world.

And what is it about sociological 'writing' that might make 'sound' intelligible? How far can we sociologically write up what we hear? And what does that sound actually 'mean' for our

descriptions of society? This of course is problematic. If sound is often, but not always, a social phenomenon then why are there very few sociological descriptions of its social power? Partly this lies in the difficulties of pursuing the ‘meaning’ of cultural and aesthetic objects. If there is meaning inherent in the sound artefact, there is a problem with understanding that meaning or set of meanings as data without ascribing meaning to it that the object might frustrate or make untenable. Like the sociology of music the relentless search for meaning or data often evades understanding the sound object in and of itself and the morphologies and taxonomies with which it is entangled. This can rest upon the sound object itself as an aesthetic production or as simply the aural reproduction of a naturally or socially occurring activity: unprocessed ‘natural’ materials that are then recomposed into ‘art’ (Emmerson 1986: 19). Luc Ferrari for example simply viewed natural landscapes as a musical tool (Wishart 1986: 43) and as spaces and locations for sonic performance (Wishart 1996 ed: 159). Indeed Trevor Wishart has argued that ‘there is no such thing as an unmusical sound object’ (1996 ed: 8) whereas Leigh Landy draws the distinction between unorganised and organised sound and the use of sound objects (Landy 2007 and see LaBelle 2007). The problem of intelligibility, description and imposition essentially remains a methodological question about socially constituted and generated sound objects and how far they have an independent existence beyond our modes of sociological description.

Are we studying the sound for a clue to the social formation or the social formation for a clue to its sounds? Is the sound simply the docile object or container of meaning that we then use as an artefact or ‘data’ about the social world? Sociological practice concerns itself with demarcating the social and the non-social in terms of objects, often leaving the ‘interiors’ to psychology and the ‘natural’ to anthropology. Indeed any form of sociality is of concern to sociological practice including musical collectivities (Hudson 2014a). But the central issue is this idea of the docile object and not just in the sense already discussed that its docility might allow meaning to be imposed upon it. It might simply reveal what it contains as data for us to observe and see through to the things we are *really* interested in: the social structure and the social formation that have deposited the sound object to our ears. Sociological practice has to perform a different feat of listening to that of general ‘human’ listening. It tries to listen to what concerns it and demarcate itself off from what does not concern it. The sociological object has to have something ‘social’ about it. At the same time the fact that these sonorities exist in our social world means that we should attend to them as objects. This means understanding the textures, auralities, properties of the object itself rather than as something we hear through to understand something else behind it. The problem lies in the possibilities of translatability and whether we have the sociological language to describe aurality and sonority.

Brian Kane has argued for Nancy’s ‘allegiance to non-indexical and non-significational modes of listening’ (Kane 2012: 442 and see Hudson 2014b). Kane notes that ‘To make listening into something other than listening for signification or indices implies an emphasis on the sensory relationship between world and listener, a listening that begins not with the search for meanings but on the basis of the sensory qualities of sounds’ (2012: 443). The displacement of the idea of the container, of the metaphor literally ‘carrying over’ meaning, of the sonority as data of another *thing* then begins to privilege the ‘sensory qualities’ of the object. This is no less sociological than the search for social ‘structure’ indeed it reaffirms the material entity as the privileged object of analysis. Further, its sensory qualities reveal the immediately sensual relationship between the body and the sound. As Nancy notes:

The womb [*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on

itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? ... The ear opens into the sonorous cave that we then become.

(Nancy 2007:37)

Birthing into sound, the instrumentation of the *organon*, of humans themselves, generates sonorities time and time again which echo through their being and the being of others.

Berio

Understanding the landscapes of sounds (Hudson 2015a, 2015b) entails the description of the natural and social world in which humans are enmeshed. The *organon* is itself about the logics of instrumentation: the way we used our bodies, as well as the prosthetic tools that we extend ourselves with, in order to exteriorise our sonorities. The human 'echo chamber', the *antrum* is that location which transmits and receives sound. Further, even if we receive and transmit without meaning or signification, those transmittances and listenings are essentially social. The exteriorisation of our interior will, design, imagination, projection is intimately entangled with multiple others: with other *antrums*, with the social, with civics, with politics, with history. In that spirit, rather than a sociology of sound, it is worth recomposing sociology itself with the 'sound world'. Rather than a sociology which listens, can we listen to sociology and can that listening change our sociological practice to make us more able, methodologically, to describe sonorous and aesthetic forms? Dominguez Rubio and Silva note that:

We present artworks as more than inanimate material backdrops or inert vehicles of social meaning, organized, classified and placed in hierarchies according to the logics emerging from the struggles of agents and institutions in the field. We claim that artworks occupy a key structuring position in the field of art, and are particularly relevant within the contemporary art field, actively shaping how the field is organized, the ways its boundaries are drawn, the exercising of judgements and the enacting of field practices.

(Dominguez Rubio and Silva 2013: 162)

The inert docile object then becomes something profoundly active and transformative. Attending to the sound might alert us to its placement in certain kinds of fields and landscapes but also how sociological practice is itself organised, where its borders and boundaries are defined and how its 'field practices' are enacted. Examining sociology in this manner also returns us to the interpretation of the sociological object or how sociology itself frames the very things it seeks to describe. As Hennion has said above and to which we return: 'Music holds a paradoxical, unstable position with regard to the question of mediation: its objects are dynamic, elusive, always in need of interpretation. This should prevent the study of musical productions from limiting itself to those material traces that, unlike in the visual arts, never amount to the work itself' (2008: 178). Indeed, in this sense what is the 'work' of sociology if the object is not the object of analytical work in terms of what it mediates? We do not sociologically labour upon the vast social structures and social formations but upon the instances and exemplars of what we presume are the hidden structures of class (taste in music indicating class position as Bourdieu has it). The sociological rather than musical 'mobilisation of material intermediaries' (Hennion 2008: 178) labours to produce the status of an 'autonomous reality', as Hennion has it, of the social structure. The objects support the materialisation and visibility of the social formation in the same way that musical notation provides a degree of fixity to the unstable and fleeting sound.

Sociology's work is then comparable to visual art practice in the way it might help notate sound and the world around it. Indeed composers like Luciano Berio saw an intimate relationship between sociological practice and musical composition and notation and employed the techniques of what would become 'performative social science'. Berio's *Sinfonia* employs as libretto a set of textual fragments from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit* diminishing the sense of the original text (Osmond-Smith 1985: 5–6). His early work with Umberto Eco also saw the development of collaborations between social-scientific practice and the use of sound objects (see Eco 1989). In Berio's work the multiplicity of fragments, resonances, parodies of other composers, create a 'sounding together' which is allusive, repetitive, complex and devoid of any singular meaning or message. The 'juxtaposed, discontinuous fragments ... often chosen to represent salient features of the original text, developed a strikingly individual resonance in isolation and combined to generate new and sometimes unexpected meanings' (Osmond-Smith 1985: 9). This new assemblage of sounds and text repeats, fuses and experiments with multiple meanings and without being directly signficatory of the 'social totality' from which it emerges. In perhaps the most sustained use of sound objects in *Visage*, Berio and Cathy Berberian forged a new sonic landscape which utterly transformed the world from which it emerged with its inventions of sound: 'These included cries, a whole gamut of different laughs, singing, a low clicking sound, isolated phonemes and syllables, and passages of nonsense language based on the phonology of English, Hebrew, and the Neapolitan dialect' (Causton 1995: 17).

Further, the relation between sociology and sound may express something profound about the fragmentation and complexity of identity in late modernity – that if one were to create an inventory of identity it would look more like a disparate collage than a coherent list. As Tim Ingold has said: 'fragmentation can be read positively in so far as it opens up passages – albeit unconventional ones – that might previously have been closed off, allowing inhabitants to find their own "ways through", and thereby to make places for themselves, amidst the ruptures of dislocation' (2007: 167). The sociology of sound can then help us rethink the question of social meaning and aesthetic objects and how far can we recompose the very nature of sociological enquiry. So to continue with some insights from Berio.

First, in terms of social meaning and the object it is possible to find all kinds of fragmented meanings in Berio's work from the use of Lévi-Strauss, Samuel Beckett and Martin Luther King in the *Sinfonia* and in terms of the elements of social language in *Visage*. His work was composed and authored and although an example of 'open work' the material entities and notations of Berio create a structure, an assemblage and an intent. That intent may be to dislocate or to initiate dissonance and fragmentation but it does not mean that 'authored' meaning is absent. What it does do is radically problematize the notion that one might see his work as a module of 'social' meaning and that the artefacts and assemblages express that 'social' as if they were semi-otic structures. The social leaves its detritus in the work but there is no guide to the fragmented 'social' labyrinth in the music.

Second, how far does Berio's work help us think about sociological enquiry or in what way can we perceive Berio himself as a sociologist? The distinction between aesthetic logics of production and the sociological account of objects is to some extent dissipated in Berio's work. He saw arts as enquiry, as a laboratory, as an inherently social practice but not as a way of describing the precompositional world behind it. If there is no description of the social labyrinth of modernity even as it leaves its detritus within musical form we can still elaborate and think about how humans can navigate his music, use it to orient themselves to that world and use his philosophy of musical materials and entities to think about materials and entities in the post-compositional world. The logics of Berio's aesthetic productions, collages, assemblages

and structures of units alert us not just to the multitude of data-points inherent in an object, but to the layers, sedimentations and the 'routes through' the social world that they are part of. Each line of notation takes us into the very heart of the labyrinth and we have used Berio to get through, and 'think through'. This is what Tim Ingold has called a 'parliament of lines' (2007: 5) – those spaces where things, humans and notations meet in the 'lifeworld'. As Berio notates the sound, the world is elaborated: 'At the same time that the gesturing hand draws out its traces upon a surface, the observing eye is drawn into the labyrinthine entanglements of the lifeworld, yielding a sense of its forms, proportions and textures, but above all of its movements – of the generative dynamic of a world-in-formation' (Ingold 2011: 224). The logic of aesthetics is itself the logic of production of the social world and of the social totality.

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