Thomas Köner

Tiento de la Luz

Tone colour, a sense of place and soundless sound

Tiento de la Luz is my second Tiento, and appears between *Tiento de las Nieves* (2014) and the upcoming *Tiento de la Oscuridad*. A Tiento is a form of keyboard music that originated in Spain in the mid-15th century. My first encounter with this musical genre goes back to a commission from Frankfurter Gesellschaft für Neue Musik, for which I chose to do an interpretation of Antonio Cabezon's *Tiento del primer tono* (1570). I rearranged and performed the work with gongs, piano, and live electronics in 2012. While *Tiento de las Nieves* is a work for solo performer and live electronics, the instrumentation of *Tiento de la Luz* is expanded: in addition to my distinct live electronics, there are two piano parts, percussion, and viola da gamba. The difference between writing electronic music, like *Permafrost* (1993), and creating music with classical instruments and electronics is only of gradual nature. At the core of my works is always a sense of place (topos) and tone colour. I often travel around the world and record sounds and images, and this can result in sonic topographies like *La Barca* (2009), an epic 22 - piece panorama of 22 locations on five continents, or *Novaya Zemlya* (2012), where the whole album is based on my engagement with an island in the Russian arctic. I experience the place and tone as unique voices of these locations, but I am aware that these associations are purely personal.

My creative process and work, evolve from an understanding of this sense of place and tone, and my awareness of its radiance. Equally important is my distinction of what it is <u>not</u>: it is not a realization that could be accomplished by the practice known as field recording (a sonic description or visual commentary on a geographic location). In fact, field recording combines three sets of activities, which could more precisely be described as "field listening", "field recording", and "field playback".

"Field listening" is just ordinary listening, unless you claim or enforce that listening to one particular sonic situation is more rewarding, interesting, or valuable than listening to another. This claim lies at the center of the activity, and it is a forced gesture on multiple levels. The notion of being "at a special place" demands the acceptance of a worldview that postulates a hierarchy of places, in which the special place on top is attributed more value than others. As a favored place is documented, an emphasis is placed on avoiding "human disturbance", thereby enforcing the view that nature and humanity are separate and distinct entities. However, this is a fallacy. Why should one place sound more special than another? What is the ideology behind the claim that the view from your apartment window is less interesting than viewing a calving glacier in Greenland's Disko Bay? Those who use this ideology create an ill-natured hierarchy, one that does little to affirm the value of so-called "exotic places" and devalues the places that are excluded.

Just as it is impossible to objectively share any listening experience, "Field recording" likewise is impossible. Listening is internal, psychological. It is a very personal and active process that filters and mixes in a creative way within every listener, and is not only determined by the physiology of the ear and its frequency range, but also by the knowledge, education, and personal preferences of the individual. A sound enters through this psychological antechamber and leaves it changed, modulated by the acoustics of the mind. These cannot be recorded in any objective sense. Like all

experiences that are full of "qualia", their interpretation is empirically inaccessible outside the perceiver and impossible to share. On the technical side, one is facing a similar lack of objectivity due to the peculiarities of the microphones that are used to document the sound itself.

"Field playback", the reproduction of the recorded situation is impossible as well. What we have is the playback of a loudspeaker-emitted noise, which is surrounded by various amounts of other (non-loudspeaker emitted) noises. A sound created by a loudspeaker is not simply a sound, it is a loudspeaker-created sound. There is a difference between these two, and it is very rewarding to draw the distinction. Whatever the assertion of the recordist, what I hear is a loudspeaker generated sound, one that is not very interesting; what I see is a pixelized image, flat, truncated and devoid of the vividness of the original situation.

Therefore the place, the seed around which the creative process unfolds, cannot be a geographical one. Is it non-geographical, and therefore non-temporal? A fluid cycle, between the present that has passed, and the overture of the present that has not yet come? The "eternal present" (commonly associated with music or its experience) is a myth and simply does not exist. If there was a present, there would also be a memory of that present which begets a memory of the remembered moment and so forth. The present never appears without a timeline. This timeline is not horizontal, it almost hurls down into the dim haze of the unconscious, where it quickly becomes invisible. It is like walking through a mine field, and memory traces will certainly be triggered, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and it is impossible to predict how and when this will unfold.

This understanding becomes important for the process of defining durations and proportions during the creative act. Designing durations and appearances also means designing the void in between. There is space. The piece unfolds and gradually fills its space, the same space that we occupy – we are participants in this space as well.

My audiovisual works are often characterized by a very low density of events. To work with the attention span is almost like the painter working with his brush: these lines are lines drawn with an invisible ink, shapes disappear, re-emerge and are experienced as a palpable part of the work's texture. Its reception is therefore shaped by absence (of attention) as well as presence. (In my occasional occupation as a pop/rock/techno re-mixer I use a mundane variation of this technique in the sense that I work with absence in the mix much more than with presence, with absent signals that do not appear in the mix but nevertheless provide texture, echoes and trails etc.)

True attentiveness is like sound: it is able to penetrate almost any object. Fading attention is also like sound, a distant hum that dissolves in the background. Beyond the limits of our attention spans there are wild, uncharted territories. These are the fields that are worth recording! There is a temptation to stretch this space of attention even further, and it keeps expanding and eventually collapses into the tiniest point, which I previously referred to as a seed.

I am doing yoga, and I understand that yoga is about learning to make a connection to the source which is, according to the Hindu/yoga tradition, vibration. This tradition claims that the internal, 'unmade', 'unstruck', 'soundless' sound arises from the heart region (therefore it is called anahata nada). It is in rare moments of deep meditation/concentration, when the 'outer world' actually feels inexistent, that this sound appears. In my experience, I locate it rather on the right side of the body, between chest and right ear. I hear it as a very thin sound, like an infinitely long and elastic spider's thread, and of a very high pitch. It is the most subtle, fragile sound I've ever heard. Does this mean one is able to perceive life in all its aspects as a continuum of music? Or rather, does it indicate tinnitus?

As with any meditative state, the 'soundless sound' is a kind of self-suggestion.

Listening is naturally 'deep', and the attempt of transforming ordinary experiences into deep listening situations is somewhat misguided.

The gesture of attributing value to one situation, and denying it the other is a rather violent one. All events in the universe have the same value, that is, no value. Who would be in the position to assign it value, anyway?

And a composers' assertion that 'the composition' is 'complete' can immediately be disproved by claiming the opposite: what if I declare it is not finished, something is missing and call it incomplete. The composers' assertion that the composition is finalized can never ever be verified. It is the belief in the idea of a composition that allows it to come into being. This means that we do not have a single complete composition: **Music does not exist.** And how could it? The beat has no presence and can only point to the following beat, the insubstantial note depends completely on its neighbors in the melodic line, the chord is dispensable after its harmonic release, and one abstract noise obstructs the other. I contend that these musical elements are marginal and peripheral, and in my work, they are emphatically deemphasized.

The only element that is independent and able to communicate itself is tone colour. Tone colour is not a sign, but a spectral power that enables resonance. And as it became clear, the mysterious seed, the *topos* of all sonic expression, lies in tone colour, or better, lies in the awareness of it, which is its resonance. The textbook definition of tone colour can only describe what it is not: qualities of sound that are not related to pitch, volume, or duration. Tone colour is therefore the absence and yet the total presence. For example, a mother reading a fairy tale to her child is reading words made of letters - but the child hears the mother's "I love you" in her voice. This is resonance.

I throw a pebble in a lake and there is resonance. If the pebble is dirty, there is still resonance. There is a sense of purity. Thoughts create resonance. Sounds create resonance. Resonance is pristine, detached of the object. Appearing as tone colour, sound has the potential to become its own resonance, effortless and luminous.

Let us liberate sound into the radiance of the clear space!