

“As Paredes Têm Ouvidos” and my work in Nodar Presentation on April 28, 2007

Aaron Ximm

Introduction

My name is Aaron Ximm, I'm from the United States. I arrived in Portugal on April 8 and this is my first time here. As a result I don't speak Portuguese yet, so please bear with me as we translate what I am saying.

I am a sound artist; my interest is in field recordings, which is recording the sounds I find in the world, instead of recording musicians or other arranged sounds in a studio. The sounds that I like are accidents, which are not made specifically to be recorded (an example of the latter is when a musician plays in a studio).

You may not agree, but I think a lot of sounds you just hear in the world are very beautiful or very interesting; but we usually don't notice them because we are busy doing things.

Background on my interest in field recording

I got interested in listening to (and recording) the sounds of the world when I started to travel outside of the United States. Before that, I was already a musician and had recorded myself, but I had only recorded normal instruments and only made music that way.

Maybe because I was an amateur musician, I paid attention to what I heard in different places. I quickly found out that the world sounds very different in different places. More importantly, I discovered I could learn a lot about places by listening to what they sound like.

For example, I discovered you could learn about the land, the wild animals, the domestic animals, the pets, the kind of work people do, the kind of songs they sing, what the local language sounds like (even when I cannot understand it) and how people talk to one another... sound is a window to understanding as big as the eyes, but usually we are so distracted looking at things that we don't pay attention to this other window.

I think it is probably easier to notice the sounds that are unique to a place when you travel; in fact, this has become a reason for me to travel. When you live somewhere, you get used to the sounds, and when they get familiar, they start to tell you different things. This is good because you learn to understand sound as if it were a language, but

as is the case with your own language, you don't really hear how it sounds – instead you think about what it means.

Just like I might be hearing more of how Portuguese *sounds* than most of you (instead of hearing *what* someone is saying or the things that the sound of the language reveals, for example, what they imply by how they are saying something, or the little details that reveal where they are from...), when I go someplace new like Nodar I hear the sounds there differently from people who live here.

I don't think I hear the places I visit “better” than the people who live there, of course; I am just able to hear them freshly for a little while, until they become familiar. I don't know the significance of different sounds at first, but I try to pay a lot of attention to what I hear.

What I hear in Nodar

I hope that what I have to share with you will remind you a little of how Nodar sounds, or get you to notice things that you may not listen to so much anymore.

If you are not from Nodar, but are from someplace nearby, many of the sounds I recorded will probably be familiar. But something I love about the sounds I record is how small differences can change the way things and places sound – like what season it is, how far away something is, what the weather is like. It is the little details that make one recording more interesting, more evocative, than another. I hope that even if what I play are familiar sounds, you will hear something new, even if it is a small thing.

I wish I could spend a whole year, or better yet several years, learning how the soundscape changes in Nodar. I realize that I am only getting a little picture of how things sound here – and not only that, I am only hearing how they sound in April – and not only that, how they sound *this* April with *this* weather, two years after the fire... etc.

Even in the short time I have been here, the sounds have changed; the frogs, for example, seem to be a lot more active now than they were a few weeks ago, and the swallows maybe not active as much... On different days the river sounds different too, I'm not always sure why.

I'm also very aware that what I have heard in Nodar is only what I can hear just walking – around town, by the river, in the pastures, in the *public* places in town.

In a few minutes I would like to talk about how thinking about that, about being outside, was important to me in my time here. But first I

would now like to play you some of the sounds that I have recorded while walking around, before introducing the project that is my main topic. I hope that even if these sounds are familiar, you will enjoy hearing them, as I heard them, and as I recorded them.

PLAY NODAR FIELD RECORDINGS COLLAGE

In this collage what you hear are all recordings I made sitting in one place and listening to specific sounds.

I know some of you saw me making recordings and you probably saw that I was trying to be completely still and quiet, and not talking. I do this in the interest of getting a good sound picture. It's like when you sit for a portrait or a painting... to get an accurate record of what is happening you need to be totally still. Please accept my apologies if I didn't talk to you while making a recording!

Some sound artists also explore the sound of a place more actively, by walking around or otherwise exploring it, often while making a recording. A common way to share this experience with other people is by recording a "sound walk," when you walk through a space following where your ears lead, often pausing to listen to things that sound interesting. You can also take a sound walk and just listen of course, without any recording equipment; in fact, some people lead sound walks in exactly this way.

I'd like to play a little of a recorded sound walk I did here in Nodar, following water down from the spring through town. I made this recording since one of the first things I noticed when I came to Nodar was how water appears and disappears through the town.

What I find interesting in this recording is how you can hear how much a single thing, in this case running water, changes as you move. It really sounds very different in different places, even though in language we would just call it a single thing, "running water."

PLAY NODAR WATER SOUND WALK

Soundscapes – the way I usually work

Unlike [my fellow resident artist] Dennis, I am not really a musician or a composer in the normal sense. I make things to listen to using the sound I record, but they aren't really music, I call them "soundscapes." Though we both work with sound and listen to it and we both work with it very closely, we approach it from different directions.

As a soundscape composer, I try to find ways that sounds can fit together to reveal something about the places I record in a more direct or artful way than an unedited recording would. I usually take many different recordings and edit them together to make a soundscape that, while not literally documenting a place anymore, says something *true* about it more clearly than any single recording usually does.

To give you an idea of what I mean let me play you a short piece I made using sounds I have recorded around my own town, San Francisco, in California. I recorded all of the sounds in this short piece over several years. I don't think this piece says how San Francisco sounds, generally, but I think it does do a good job of expressing how my life in San Francisco sounds.

PLAY SF SAUVIGNON

Here's another example, this time of the kind of soundscape I have made about places I have traveled. This piece, ***Khulna Station***, was made with sounds I recorded in Bangladesh.

PLAY KHULNA STATION excerpt

I make sound collages like the one I just played with the idea that people will listen to them the same way they listen to music. Though it may not sound like it if you don't listen to this sort of thing regularly, the methods I use and decisions I made in a piece like ***Khulna Station*** are actually very "musical," at least by contemporary standards. (I mention this because the piece I made as my central project here in Nodar was made according to a different way of making soundscapes.)

Doing something different in Nodar

At home, I have a studio with my own tools in it; but even with my own tools, I work fairly slowly when I make these kinds of things. Since I am used to using specific tools that I could not bring with me, I knew from the start that for my main project here in Nodar I would probably do something different.

Fortunately, that was fine with me, since I have been thinking a lot recently about the ways that we sound artists can use sound that are different from music. I looked forward to having time to develop a project exploring some ideas to see if they actually worked.

One thing I have been interested in recently is exploring what happens when you listen to recorded sound in the same place that it comes from, instead of taking it somewhere else and making it into something

else. Metaphorically this might be the same as the difference between on the one hand, taking stone from the hills here, and moving it slightly to clear a pasture or build a house – and on the other, taking the same stone out of the river and off to a city to use in a building project that has nothing to do with Nodar. I think it is fair to say that there is something lost when you take materials away from their origins.

Since I knew I would make something here in Nodar that was for people to listen to in Nodar, I knew I could work on something the first way: I would make something that moved the sound here only a little bit from where I found and recorded it. I knew my sounds would still be "fresh," or maybe a better word is "green" – like the wine I have been happily drinking here every day!

I mentioned before that some sound artists actually don't move sound at all, they just take people to places and ask them to listen in person – like the soundwalk I played you.

In my work I usually move things – by necessity, of course, since I record a lot when traveling. That's not always bad; moving things into a new context is sometimes like putting a frame on a picture. It draws attention and makes what is inside the frame stand out from the background.

Let me say a bit about what I was trying to do with my project before you get a chance to experience it in person.

First I should explain that the project I did is actually a "sound installation." It is partly about the way I put specific objects in a specific place, instead of being just about the sound. In this case I made an installation, instead of just a soundscape to listen to normally like music, because the place is so important to what I was thinking about as I made it, and how I made it. (But don't worry, for those of you who do not have time or interest, I will play a little of the sound for you here too in a moment.)

Project inspiration

When Binaural invites people here they hope they will do a project. When I wrote a proposal to come here, though, I did not have specific idea in mind; I like to go places and to think about what I find there, instead of taking an idea with me.

This project came into focus when after a week of being here, I was thinking about how there is a whole kind of sound in Nodar that I had only been able to hear a little bit of. This is sound that you who live here

know very well, but it's still something different from the sounds I played you from my exploration of the village.

That thing I couldn't hear was the sound inside – inside your houses, where at least half of the “real life” of Nodar occurs. (By the way, more life happens outside and in public here than where I live in California, but it still only a part of the story...)

As I thought about this one day as I was walking up to the cell phone tower, I realized that I wanted to do something with the sounds I was hearing that was partly about the sound that I *wasn't* hearing.

I thought about the experience I was having making recordings, how it was all of things that are outside.

Now in the back of mind clearly as I walked must have been that the first thing I really noticed when I came here was the use of the slate, the local stone, everywhere – how it was used to make the buildings, the walls, the bridge, the terraces, everything.

To my eyes the stone construction here is very beautiful. First of all because it is hand made; I thought a lot about how much work went into building everything here. Things are not all similar in the way they are when they are mass-manufactured. I noticed how, though the walls are very solid, they have a complicated surface, how every one is different, how many walls have things growing on them too. They are a whole world of their own, one I like very much.

As I walked I realized that these walls I liked were a perfect symbol for me of what my experience was. The walls both support the community (literally) and make its existence and work possible, and function to keep things out.

Coming as I do from the outside, I am one of the people they keep out. That is not a bad thing; it is what walls are for. In English we have a saying that good walls make good neighbors (actually good fences, but it is the same idea).

I thought about how the challenge with doing a project about Nodar and the life here is that I could hear things only outside the walls.

I thought about how these walls have been here for many years or decades, and how during that whole time there have been places inside of them, in the cracks and holes. I realized that those little places would of course sound different from the world outside.

With all this in mind, I decided it would be a perfect project to investigate how the walls *literally* sound on their insides. Or, in another way of thinking about it, what the walls “hear.”

Resonance and recording in the walls of Nodar

Luckily for me, I brought with me a pair of very small microphones – small enough to go inside the walls in what we would call nooks and crannies in English.

With these small microphones, I realized I could learn what the walls sound like (or “hear”) on their inside. Putting microphones inside the walls lets me hear how things would sound if I could be inside the wall.

As a sound artist, I am interested generally in the way that any place changes the way things sound in it. One of the first things I noticed when I got here, for example, is how the sound of the river changes depending on how close you are to a wall. Especially when you are up close, if you move a little closer or a little farther away, the sound changes.

The same kind of thing happens *inside* the walls, in their cracks and holes, because, just like in bottles or other small places, sounds resonate.

If you hold a bottle up to your ear, or more famously, a seashell, you can hear how the sound caught inside is changed. Some sounds – some frequencies – get “captured” (or more exactly, emphasized and reinforced) by the specific sizes and shapes of places, and others escape, which is to say, rapidly cancel themselves out and vanish. In the sound world we describe this as a “coloration” of the sound.

I would guess that most of you could tell all the rooms in your house apart in the dark, just by the way they sound. One thing my project is about is how the same thing is true for the different holes and cracks in the walls around Nodar. Each of these small places has a different characteristic sound, or coloration, because it has a different size and shape. Some of them have moss in them, or dust, or plants growing... even difference in the specific makeup of the stones can make small but hearable differences in how each crevice sounds.

As a sound artist, I am interested in those differences. Sticking my microphones into the walls, I heard what they captured, and not what they let go of or what was stopped by them.

How I feel about the project

This project was an experiment; for me, I would say it has been a successful one.

I like the recordings I got, and I like that they are quite different from what I have done in the past – and not only because they were made here in Nodar. As you heard in the first recordings I played, I usually try to make my recordings as clear and transparent as possible, as realistic. This project was about doing the opposite: I chose not only to accept but to specifically seek out recordings that were *not* transparent, as I normally like. This was an experiment in intentionally making recordings in places that sound different from what we normally hear.

Another aspect of this project that I like is that it symbolically reflects my coming here from the outside, and hearing something different from what am I used to. I mean: compared to the big city where I live, Nodar is a small, unique place that I have not heard before. I like that my project is about making recordings in the small, unique places that, in turn, are found inside Nodar.

Finally, I am always happy when I can take something that seems like an obstacle and make it into a strength. In this case, I was struggling with Nodar's walls as something that were doing their job of stopping me from going wherever I wanted to, and I turned them into the subject of my work and my ally.

With that in mind, for my next project I would like to make recordings *inside* all the dogs of Nodar who have been barking at me for the past month... just kidding!

Details of the project realization

I was happy to learn from Luis that there is a saying in Portuguese, "**As Parades Têm Ouvidos**," just as we have in English, "the walls are listening," and, "the walls have ears." I chose this as the name of my project, and I hope you agree it's a good title for what I did.

Now, to tell you a little about of the specifics of what you can hear up the road at the installation itself.

I brought with me some very small sound players; I put them in a wall just up the road, with headphones coming out. If you listen to the headphones, you can hear some of the sounds that I recorded around Nodar inside the walls.

I made about thirty recordings inside different walls over about ten days, totaling about five or six hours of different sounds. Over the last week I have been listening to those sounds, and I chose about forty minutes of sound that I think together represent what I was able to hear this way.

There are five different sound players in the installation, and each one has a different group of sounds on them. I divided the things I recorded in the walls into five different categories. Because of what I heard and was able to record, some of the categories have more sound than others, so some of the players have more on them. All of the players play in a loop, though; if you listen long enough, the same thing will come around again.

If you live here in Nodar (or nearby), most of these sounds will be familiar to you. If that is the case, let me suggest that you listen to hear how they sound *different* inside the wall – if they do. Some sounds are more obviously colored than others.

I thought it was interesting that some kinds of sound seemed to get right into the heart of the wall, without changing in ways that I can hear, while others are very changed.

Sometimes the sounds are harder to hear because the microphones were deep in the wall, or because the sounds came from far away from the wall. But it is these differences that make these recordings interesting to me.

One funny thing is that you can sometimes hear people wondering what I was doing and talking about it. One thing that's a challenge when making recordings around other people is that if you talk when you're making a recording, it is usually spoiled – so sometimes I have only waved at some of you instead of talking. Please accept my apology, I always feel terrible when this happens, and I hope I didn't seem too rude! (I guess, though, that many of you have come to expect strange behavior from the artists who visit here. I think it's safe to say that when we offend, we do not mean to, and I beg your indulgence of the odd things we who get to visit might do!)

By the way, if you want to know the categories of sound on the players, they were sounds of people, sounds of things that people made here, sounds of animals that are raised here, some of the sounds of the water (I really love water sound and record a lot of it), and sounds of nature and weather.

Because all these sounds are from Nodar, though, something of all of these artificial categories have ended up on all of the players; by

making categories, I just tried to have each player emphasize a different thing. One of the things I have loved here, for example, is that I couldn't go anywhere without hearing three things: the rush of the river in the spring, the tinkle of bells on animals grazing, and many different bird songs. For me this is a lovely "music," and it makes me happy that these sounds are not only the ones I recorded most of, but present in most of my recordings, even when they are very quiet or in the distance.

For those of you who will not be able to visit the installation, I prepared a sample of some of the sounds you would hear coming out of the walls at the installation.

PLAY SOUND COLLAGE OF WALL RECORDINGS

Closing remarks and thanks

In conclusion, though my project was simple, I hope it reveals something new about how things sound as Nodar.

I would like to thank Binaural Media for having me here; it is a great honor to come to Nodar to the Guest Studio. I am grateful not only to have been here, but to the generosity and support in every aspect of my stay from Luis, Manuela, Cristina, and Rui. I am inspired by the care and concern they put into making sure that I had everything I needed to do my best. I am sure I do not have to tell you what great people they are and what a contribution they are making to Nodar and this area!

I would also very much like to thank the people of Nodar for making me feel so welcome, in town, in your homes, and of course, in the bar!

I really appreciate the kindness many of you have shown me and the way you have let me learn about life here. I am sure you know it, but let me reassure you that Nodar is a special place, and I envy both the place and the life you have made here. I look forward to my next visit!

Thanks and good night, and thanks for listening!

Now, anyone who would like to visit the installation to hear more sound, let's go visit it up the road...