

# Listening to the Nonhuman

## Or How to Build an Interspecies Acoustic Community

### Abstract

This research project, titled “Listening to the Nonhuman: Or How to Build an Interspecies Acoustic Community,” aims to explore from the perspective of artistic practice the emerging field of ecoacoustics and its potential to foster interspecies communication within a community of aware listeners. Rooted in a personal history of ecological engagement the project seeks to answer critical questions about human alienation from natural environments and the possibilities for appreciating and understanding nonhuman music. The research is structured around three interconnected components:

1. **Theoretical Exploration:** This segment integrates ecoacoustics with decolonial theory, challenging anthropocentric and colonial perspectives in ecological studies. Outputs will include academic papers, a series of podcasts, and an online platform for sharing research findings.
2. **Educational Workshops and Public Engagement:** These activities will utilize creative listening and narrative techniques to raise awareness and knowledge about the sound complexity of ecosystems among diverse audiences, including children and adults.
3. **Field Research and Documentation:** Focused on the listening modalities of the soundscapes of European rural communities, this part involves documenting traditional ecological knowledge and practices related to acoustic ecology through interviews and archival research.

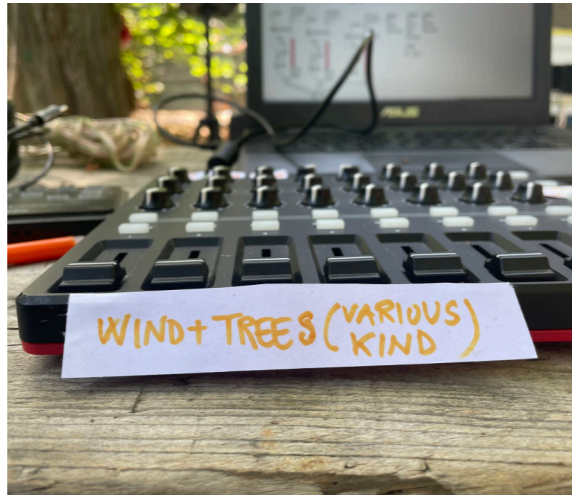
Through a combination of workshops, public presentations, field research, and theoretical inquiry, this project aims to promote the concept of acoustic communities, where humans and nonhumans coexist and communicate in a shared sonic environment. By emphasizing the importance of listening, imagination, and ethical engagement with the environment, the research aspires to contribute to a deeper

understanding of ecological interdependence and the cultural significance of nonhuman sonic complexity.

### Introduction

The project began when I had been asked to organize a workshop for children as part of a series called “Erdeworkshop” about art and ecology. This took place on July 2022 at the cultural venue and lido “Strandbad Tegelsee” in Berlin. While preparing for the workshop, I came across a rather recent discipline namely, ecoacoustics. Ecoacoustics “is the ecological investigation and interpretation of environmental sound” (Sueur and Farina 2015). During a research work, several questions began to arise: Why are most of us human beings, including myself, so alienated from the environment on which we also strictly depend for our survival? Why is interspecies communication so difficult? Is there for us the possibility to understand and appreciate nonhuman music? And what does this “us” mean? Humanity as such or only a part of it? Trying to answer these questions has resulted in an expansion of the project in directions that include ideas and theories from decolonial ecology, ethnological research on the relationship between human and nonhuman in rural communities and recent perspectives about nonhuman art and music.

A podcast episode, a lecture given at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin as part of the symposium “Time to Listen” (August 20, 2023) and a second workshop, this time designed for adults, (August 26, 2023 in Strandbad Tegelsee, Berlin) have followed the first one I have already mentioned. The project consists of three main parts that are closely interconnected but focus on different aspects of the issues involved and also will result in some specific outputs. These are: a part of research, deepening and consolidation of the theoretical framework; a part of public dissemination and community building through the practical implementation of creative listening; a part of ethno-musicological field research.



## 1. Theoretical Exploration

A theoretical framework is already present but needs to be developed and expanded.

At the origin of the project are hypotheses, concepts and strands of research in the field of ecoacoustics, among others for example, the acoustic niche hypothesis, the acoustic clustering hypothesis, the eco-field model, the concept of acoustic communities, the research on the role and importance of geophysical sounds. These constitute a raw foundation based on paper articles and research outputs. To make all these meaningful for the aims of the project, they need to be put in a broader framework. An intersection between recent perspectives in zoömusicology, ethnomusicology and decolonial ecology has proven to be very promising. From one side we have a reconsideration of culture, art and music not as exclusively human facts but also present in many other species (Martinelli D., Taylor H., Rothenberg D.), and the concept of Eurocentric musical tourism (Sorace Keller 2012, 2016). From the other the criticism of a white ecology that erases the colonial experience and of the supposed universality of concepts such as “anthropocene”, “humanity as such” and the like (Ferdinand M., Yusoff K., Haraway D., Zylinska J.). The conception of communal and horizontal art making as carried out by artist Marina Naprushkina at the "Neue Nachbarschaft / Moabit" initiative in Berlin is also central to the development of my thesis. Since the field of the research is very broad, a consideration of studies and theories of human and non-human cognition would be also very important.

To provide a concrete example I will present a fundamental concept of landscape ecology, but which plays a very important role in ecoacoustics, that is the eco-field (Farina 1998). According to eco-field theory, every organism searches “a recognizable spatial configuration - we could call it a semiotic interface - that facilitates the interception of the resource necessary at a specific time to accomplish a specific need” (Farina and Gage 2017, 18). The perception of an ecosystem, and consequently of the soundscape too, is configured and shaped in accordance with the needs of a species and an individual. The eco-field model describes a way to navigate and make sense of an

environment that is also a way of taking care of it, a way of learning about an ecosystem that is also a way of caring for it precisely because you are dependent on it for the fulfillment of your needs. It is indeed true that we have developed quite detailed knowledge of certain aspects of the environment, but mainly with the aim of dominating it and not of taking care of it. Also the usual approach of the soundscape in an ecosystem is comparable to the one we Westerners have toward music belonging to other cultures.

## 2. Educational Workshops and Public Engagement: Creative Listening in Practice

What enables these concepts to be applied in a concrete practice is a practice called “Creative Listening”. Is not a new practice and, as the third part of the project should prove, it has been used for centuries, specially in rural communities. It starts with an aware listening matured through a long coexistence and resource sharing between humans and nonhumans. The information gathered through this process has been then organised and reframed through the use of imagination in order to produce a fertile community discourse that enables humans to make sense of the complexity of the ecosystem, to orient themselves in it, to use its resources and to take care of it. Phenomena and relationships are mimicked and named, stories are told, mythologies are built around them. It’s an way to anthropomorphise mainly based on care rather than on domination and exploitation.

An example will better explain this method. An important hypothesis of ecoacoustics that is having many experimental confirmations is called the acoustic niche hypothesis. It stipulates that at a given location each species would occupy non-overlapping specific acoustic spaces to avoid interference (Sueur, Krause and Farina 2019). This finely tuned sound structure has evolved organically together with geophysical sounds and forms with them a sonotope. During the workshops I held, to explain the complexity of these phenomena, I told a story of two individuals of a bird species who must find themselves in the tangle of a forest, and I drew parallels with a similar situation in which two humans might find themselves. For children I tried to stage this a little more theatrically by asking

the participants what they would do if they were birds in the thick of the forest and consequently how they would behave and what sound they would produce to communicate with each other. Then I played them recordings of the sounds from the species in question. This was a first short experiment, circumscribed in the time of a single workshop. But having more time to refine the listening and sensing and thus to increase the familiarity with the nonhuman, could bring much more different and original outputs (sounds, drawings, stories, plays etc). This requires and at the same time fosters the creation of a community of listeners. I also want to mostly avoid the use of field recording as much as possible, as it is a practice that can be quite problematic (see Möller 2023 about “unrecording the field”).

The whole process can be structured in this way:

1. Explanation of one or more key concepts and phenomena example. For instance, the role and importance of geophysical sounds in an ecosystem, the relationship between soundscape change and climate change, the phenomenon opposite to the acoustic niche i.e., synchronization, the things that we humans cannot perceive in a landscape but other species can, how anthropogenic sound disturbs and endangers ecosystems, what an acoustic community is and how it functions etc.
2. Listening sessions outdoor. Every place is good, also urban areas and parks. Try to concentrate on specific elements, be silent and curious.
3. Reframing and reworking. This is the artistic practice in itself. Reimagine the experience had in point 1 and 2 or some elements or parts of it. Try not to tell about yourself but on what you have been sensing. Leave the artistry and the self expression behind and concentrate on the otherness you experienced. Also share it, collaborate and discuss it, this is not supposed to be a private practice.
4. Another session in the same place. Returning in the same place is very important. Repetition and time are essential to build familiarity and empathy and to gain a deeper knowledge of an ecosystem and their inhabitants.

Repeat point 3 and 4 n-times.

All the documentation produced by workshops, listening sessions, discussions and podcasts will be made available on an online platform will be subject to the request for ethical consent for its use by those involved after being fully informed of how and where the material will be used. In the case of workshops with children, the material produced (drawings, stories, sounds) should be made public only with the explicit consent of the child and the parents. Anonymity will be assured if desired.

## 3. Field Research and Documentation: Rural Sound Cultures in Europe.

Long before these scientific discoveries, deep knowledge of the sound complexity of ecosystems already existed, even in Europe. Just to give an example, according to sources from the early 20th century (Garbari 1897, 1922), in some alpine valleys of northern Italy, in the area now included in the province of Brescia, the rural populations had developed a vast system of names to distinguish and remember the chaffinch's song. Today it is known that the songs of many bird species have territorial variations, basically dialects. In addition, there are generational variations and even trends that are followed perhaps for some times and then abandoned in favour of others. Each variation, each different accent and dialect of the chaffinch received its own name, often onomatopoeic, that echoed the sound of a particular fragment. With “*francesco mio*” for example, were called those individuals who made a small variation at the end of a sentence that sounded similar to those two Italian words (Garbari 1922). This way of relating to acoustic signals and, in fact, music produced by other species presupposes a careful listening, time, dedication and the use of imagination. It is also a testimony of the closeness and familiarity with the nonhuman that has been and in a way is still present even if marginally, in little-known areas of European culture. The concrete work will be to expand the knowledge of these practices. This will mainly involve doing field research through interviews and consulting local archives and libraries in order to produce written material or, if possible, video and audio documentation.

Each person interviewed will be asked for a voluntary, unambiguous, informed and documented consent, according to the Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities. I already have various contacts regarding the Italian Alpine valleys from the province of Brescia to South Tyrol, both institutional (Natural Science Museum Trento, Provincial Archives of Bolzano, Civiltà Bresciana Foundation) and personal. Work with international partners will in any case have to be balanced and oriented according to Norwegian ethical standards. Italian institutions have an economic disadvantage so the collaborative work will therefore be carried out with transparency and close dialogue. In addition, I would like to extend my research to Central and Northern Europe. Here the work will be primarily study and writing (papers, articles etc.) to develop expand and consolidate this thesis. In addition, I would like to organize a series of six podcasts or radio episodes, two per year, in which all these issues are told and discussed together with another musician or researcher, every time coming from a different background. So each episode is mainly a dialogue, an exchange of ideas, and a reflection for two on all these issues and maybe the chance to produce new perspectives.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, workshops, talk, educational work, dissemination through online platforms and all the other things mentioned above are about promoting and trying to create **acoustic communities**. The concept of acoustic community is central to ecoacoustics and is defined as “an aggregation of species that produces sound by using internal or extra-body sound-producing tools” (Farina and James 2016). For me in this context, it means trying to build an open and fluid interspecies community, in which humans, especially Westerners, are basically required to **listen**. A way to listen that needs care, patience, time, imagination and sharing, is aware of one’s own ignorance and of the fact that, in order to avoid mass extinction we need to rethink and decolonize of the way we obtain and distribute our resources.

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