The ethical potential of sound in public space: Migrant pan flute music and its potential to create moments of conviviality in a 'failed' public square

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the notion that music in public space could be understood in terms of ethical potential, where new sensibilities for thinking, feeling, seeing and being with others might be imagined and practiced. We do this by considering how musical performances by migrants impact on inclusive forms of place (re-)making, affective enactments of public space and emotional accounts of belonging and 'the other'. The paper draws on an ethnographic exploration of South American pan flute musicians, performing music at Sergels torg, a central square in Stockholm, Sweden. Through fieldwork with a combination of qualitative techniques, including observation, interviews and sensory methods such as photography, video and recorded 'sound walks' we trace the affective aspects of encounters with busking and the impact of music on place. We highlight the ethical potential of music in the experience of urban moments and its capacity to reconfigure space. We find that encounters with sound can produce new spaces of conviviality and inclusion; it can soothe, animate and soften urban spaces. However, a positive encounter with difference through sound depends on a favourable social, physical and temporal context, and because busking serves to make marginalised voices heard (both literally and metaphorically), it can be experienced as troubling for precisely this reason. Thus, we need to take into account the full complexity of the dynamics between sound and place, in considering this relationship as a novel window to the ethical potential of the urban encounter.

1. Introduction

> Music … allows sharing with the other(s) in difference before and beyond any word or cultural specificity (Irigaray, 2004: 101).

> 'in a well-designed and well-managed public space, the armor of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people. Seeing people different from oneself responding to the same setting in similar ways creates a temporary bond.' (Carr et al., 1993: 344)

Sergels torg, the square by the central station in Stockholm, is one of those stark and seemingly inhumane urban spaces that perfectly exemplify the failed vision of modernist planning. However, like all other examples of its kind, as a lived social space it is also much more. For us, the authors, it is a place we have grown up with; a gateway to the city associated with coming-of-age and first independent mobility; where we have met up with many friends over the years; taken part in the odd demonstration; or just absent-mindedly wandered across the monochrome flagstones on our way into the city. It is not a well-loved place, but a significant one nonetheless, not just in individual biographies like ours, but also for the multifaceted role it plays socially, culturally and politically, in the city and beyond. One of the things that Sergels torg is well-known for locally, is the pan flute musicians that have regularly busked there for more than thirty years. In this paper, we attend to the significance of their street music for the emotional and affective qualities of Sergels torg as a public place, in order to explore what we might term the ethical potential of sound in public space.

The recent surge in academic work within the interdisciplinary

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field of sound studies has established that attending to sound helps us rethink how people relate to each other, and the places they inhabit (Bull and Back, 2016). A sonic perspective on everyday relations in the city not only speaks to geography because sounds are inherently spatial in that they afford awareness of our environment, but also because they are event-like (O'Callaghan, 2007); sounds are a means by which new social experiences and engagements with common spaces may occur, however fleeting. The potential of busking to create moments of conviviality between people in an urban environment has received some attention from scholars interested in the impact of music on experiencing the city (Arkette, 2004; Atkinson, 2011; Bywater, 2007; Kytö and Hytönen-Ng, 2016; Simpson, 2011; Tanenbaum, 1995). The role of migrant street musicians in the constitution of, and encounter with, ethnic and cultural diversity in cities has only briefly been considered. However, since the early 1990s a growing interest in the mobility of cultural forms has led migration researchers to turn to forms of creative cultural production such as music, film and dance. The literature on music and migration has explored this relationship not only in terms of processes and results of migration as in ethnomusicology studies, but this work has also focused on analysing song lyrics to shed light on experiences of transnational cultural production (e.g. Kaya, 2002). Slightly earlier work by Tanenbaum (1995), however, points towards the role of sound in the experience of urban diversity. Her study on music performance in the subway posits that music improves urban life by offering security and personal exchange that crosses lines of ethnicity and class. Others have briefly touched on the role of busking in the cyclical journeys of migrants, where busking in more affluent European cities is a way to earn money to support family members at home (e.g. Grill, 2011), and the liminal position of buskers, occupying an ambivalent space between performance and begging (Butler Brown, 2007; Bywater, 2007; Kytö and Hytönen-Ng, 2016). We have ourselves previously reflected on the position of migrant buskers in the in-between world of the local and the global (Doughty and Lagerqvist, 2014). Studies dealing with the role of music in broader productions of place-identity can be found in work on music and tourism/travel (Connell and Gibson, 2003, 2008; Gibson and Connell, 2005), world music (Connell and Gibson, 2004), and place marketing (Gibson and Davidson, 2004). There is a growing interest in music's role in urban experiences on the basis of the increasing mobility of music technologies such as mp3 players (see for example Bull, 2007; Beer, 2007, 2010). However, this wide-ranging literature has not fully explored the influence of music, and busking in particular, on diversification of city spaces and urban encounters around the world.

In this paper we are interested in how busking impacts on diversity and inclusive forms of place (re-)making, aspects of encounters with, and enactments of, public social space that can be explored both in their affective and emotional capacity. We explore the encounter with busking by South American pan flute musicians at Sergels torg, in Stockholm, Sweden, emphasising the range of emotions the music performances give rise to and the affective engagements with the social space of the square they trigger. We consider whether these musical encounters have the potential to contribute to the makings of new spaces where the city can be re-imagined, debate can occur, where new identities may be forged and marginalised voices can be heard, thus investigating moments of ethical potential in music's capacity to reconfigure space (Connor, 2004a). This entails examining dimensions of the city that are more-than-visual and more-than-verbal, and perhaps not always easily observable or accessible in interviews, in particular as the encounter with music in public space is often in passing, and makes itself known in a fleeting and often barely perceptible manner. However, we argue that these ephemeral aspects of the interactions between people, sound and place can have a strong impact on how places are practiced, and can be traced in dominant narratives about place-specific experiential qualities such as atmosphere, safety, sociability and belonging. The migrant buskers and their music constitute a focus for the experience of difference, but this music also becomes the central dimension through which we seek to understand the tensions between difference and familiarity in urban place-making, thus a number of contrasting expressions of place emerge. Approaching place-making through sound means its aesthetic, socio-cultural, ethical, emotional and affective dimensions emerge in new light. We find that encounters with sound can produce new spaces of conviviality and inclusion; it can soothe, animate and soften urban spaces. However, a positive encounter with difference through sound depends on a favourable social, physical and temporal context, and because busking serves to make marginalised voices heard (both literally and metaphorically), it can be experienced as troubling for precisely this reason.

The fieldwork combined a range of qualitative techniques, including observation, interviews and 'sensory methods' (Pink, 2009) such as photography, video and recorded 'sound walks'. A total of 30 individual participants were interviewed, comprising of 13 men and 17 women. Most of the participants were resident in Stockholm, but eight were visitors to Stockholm (for work or leisure) from other parts of Sweden. 14 participants were between the ages of 17 and 30, and 16 were between 31 and 73, 25 were born in Sweden and five outside Europe. Although the research makes no claims of being representative of other public spaces, performances, or experiences, nor of the attitudes of the Swedish population at large, the participant characteristics broadly reflect the makeup of the Swedish population, with approximately 16% born outside of the country (Fores, 2016). The interviewees were approached among bystanders and passers-by and were interviewed on-site. We spent five days, mostly during daytime, at Sergels torg in order to conduct interviews but also to immerse ourselves in the atmosphere and situational characteristics of the musical performance. Through video and sound recordings at the square we were able to grasp movements and emotional expressions, such as dancing, walking pace and facial expressions, among the people in the vicinity of the performers. We also tried to capture the place by writing field notes of our own experiences of the square and everything we sensed while we were on site. In this article we draw on all this data to trace the affective aspects of encounters with busking, as well as emotional perceptions of the impact of music on place. Taken together, the participant narratives and sensory data enabled us to discern broader patterns in how sensory encounters figured in the affective production of place, and emotional perceptions of belonging, and conceptualisations of authenticity. From this, a politics and ethics around the sensory foundations of place emerged, where we locate the ethical potential of music performed in public social spaces. As such, the paper contributes to a wider discussion of the role of arts and cultural performance in public space in the production of liveable, inclusive and diverse cosmopolitan cities (Simpson, 2011; Sharp et al., 2005; Tanenbaum, 1995; Gibson and Stevenson, 2004), as well as the growing debate on the value of attending to sound in geographical research (Gallagher and Prior, 2014; Anderson et al., 2005; Fraser, 2009; Wood and Smith, 2004; Connell and Gibson, 2003).

2. The ethical potential of public space

Cities have always been diverse places in socio-economic, cultural and ethnic terms, but some (e.g. Bridge and Watson, 2000: 225) have argued that 'contemporary cities are increasingly affected by complex patterns of local/global interconnection and disconnection', which provides opportunities for encountering