

Profound Listening and Environmental Sound Matter

FRANCISCO LÓPEZ

The work of Spanish sound artist Francisco López (1964–) grows out of his experience as an entomologist. While doing fieldwork in Latin American rainforests, López was struck by the connection between the rainforest soundscape and Pierre Schaeffer's concept of "acousmatic listening." Though rainforests are full of sound, the sources of these sounds (insects, birds, monkeys, etc.) remain largely hidden. Over the past two decades, López's work as a sound artist has exploited this connection between field recordings and acousmatic listening. He considers himself an ecologist; yet rejects many of the assumptions and practices of the Acoustic Ecology movement and its founder, R. Murray Schafer. In this piece, López rejects the idea that sound recording can ever be simply representational and argues instead that it is always a creative act. López's recordings are nearly all "untitled" in an effort to call our attention to the sounds themselves rather than to their sources. For the same reason, he asks that audience members wear blindfolds during his live performances. In this discussion of his 1997 recording *La Selva* (composed entirely of field recordings from the La Selva rainforest reserve in Costa Rica), López summarizes his compositional philosophy and theory of listening.

Many nature recordings as well as some current sound art embody an aesthetic that is governed by traditional bioacoustic principles, which emphasize procedural, contextual, or intentional levels of reference. Whenever there is such a stress on the representational/relational aspect of nature recordings, the meaning of the sounds is diminished, and their inner world is dissipated.

Counter to this trend, I believe in the possibility of a "blind" listening, a profound listening freed as much as possible from such constraints. This form of listening doesn't negate what is *outside* the sounds but explores and affirms all that

is *inside* them. This purist, absolute conception is an attempt at fighting against the dissipation of this inner world.

Nature Sound Environments vs. Bioacoustics

My approach departs from traditional bioacoustics, which follows a reductive interpretation of nature recordings. This discipline focuses on capturing the sounds produced by different animal species, mainly for identification purposes [. . .] The sounds of many animal species are included in the recordings that constitute my work, *La Selva*, and they have even been identified, but none of them has been singled out in the processes of recording and editing. With traditional bioacoustics, the aim of which is scientific, the calls, songs, or other sounds of a certain species are usually isolated from the "background" sound of its environment in both the recording and the editing processes, and the contrast between the foregrounded species and its background is even further enhanced.

In *La Selva* the sound-producing animal species appear together with other accompanying biotic and non-biotic components that inhere in the sound environment. Any resulting distinction between foreground and background was not arranged purposefully but emerged incidentally, due to the location of the microphones, as might occur with our ears. My attention was "focused" on the sound environment as a whole, which is one of the reasons why there are no indexes on the CD. I wanted to discourage a focal listening centered on the entrances of species or other sonic events.

The habitual focus on animals as the main elements in a sound environment is particularly limiting. Not only are non-biotic sound sources evident in many nature environments (rainfall, rivers, storms, wind), but there is also a type of sound-producing biotic component that exists in almost every environment and that is usually overlooked: plants. In most cases—especially forests—what we tend to refer to as the sound of rain or wind might more aptly be called the sound of plant leaves and branches.

If our reception of nature sounds were more focused on the environment as a whole rather than on the organisms we perceive to be most similar to us, we would be more likely to take the bioacoustics of plants into account. Further, a sound environment is the consequence not only of all its sound-producing components, but also of all its sound-transmitting and sound-modifying elements. The birdsong we hear in the forest is as much a consequence of the trees or the forest floor as it is of the bird. If we listen attentively, the topography, the degree of humidity of the air, or the type of materials in the topsoil become as essential and defining of the sonic environment as the sound-producing animals that inhabit a certain space [. . .]

In my work with nature sound environments, I have moved away from the rationalizing and categorizing of these aural entities. I prefer this environmental perspective not because it is more "complete" or more "realistic" but because it encourages a perceptual shift from the recognition and differentiation of sound sources to the appreciation of the resulting sound matter. As soon as the call is in the air, it no longer belongs to the frog that produced it.

The Illusion of Realism or the Fallacy of the “Real”

The recordings that are featured on *La Selva* have not been modified or subjected to any process of mixing or additions. One might say that this work features “pure” nature sound environments, as is often claimed on commercially released nature recordings. But I believe this obscures a series of questions that have to do with our sense of reality and our notions about its representation in sound recordings. In some of the nature recordings that attempt to convey an easy sense of naturalness, various animal vocalizations are mixed over a background matrix of environmental sound. As in the case of traditional bioacoustics, in which sounds are isolated, this artificial mixing approach of massive inclusion could be criticized as being unreal or hyperreal. Yet we should then consider on which grounds are we criticizing this tricky departure from reality.

Since the advent of digital recording technology (with all its concomitant sound-quality improvements), it has become all the more evident, in our attempt at apprehending the sonic world around us, that the microphones we use are not only our basic interfaces, they are non-neutral interfaces. The way different microphones “hear” varies so significantly that they can be considered as a first transformational step in the recording process. The consequences of the choices made regarding which microphones will be used are more dramatic than, for example, a further re-equalization of the recordings in the studio.

Yet even if we don’t subtract or add anything to the recording, we cannot avoid imposing on it our version of what we consider to be reality. Attempts have been made to circumvent this problem by means of technological improvements. The ambisonics surround sound system, for example, is foreseen as a means of *reproducing* soundscapes, conveying a more realistic sense of envelopment and an illusion of “being there.” Although I appreciate the palette of new sound nuances and the “spaceness” facilitated by these technological improvements, it isn’t “realism” that I’m after in my work. But this evocation of place seems frequently to be an objective in the creation of nature recordings.

Only I don’t think “reality” is being reproduced with these techniques; rather, a hyperreality is being constructed. The carefully recorded, selected, and edited sound environments that we are able to comfortably enjoy in our favorite armchairs offer an enhanced listening experience, one that we would likely not have if we were hearing those sounds in the “real” world. Ironically, it is often these nonrealistic effects that give this kind of sound work its appeal, as they satisfy our expectations of how “the real thing” sounds. I don’t mean to suggest that the recorded version is better. Rather, I want to suggest that it is not a version but a different entity with its own inherent value.

Sound editing seems to be another unavoidable obstacle in the attempt to portray aural reality. Whereas the “microphone interface” transfigures the spatial and material characteristics of sound, editing affects its temporality. This process has already begun to take place during the act of recording in that there is always a start and an end for the recording. In most cases, further “time windows” are created in the editing process when a new start and a new end are established for the sound fragment. Also, when we have several sound fragments, we create a montage.

If it is naturalness that we are after in our sound work, what kind of editing makes a piece sound more “real”? David Dunn has challenged the decision often

made in nature recording to eliminate human-made sounds. He contends that the elision of sound fragments of natural environments that contain human sonic intrusions (aircraft, road traffic, etc.)—by not recording them or editing them out—is a “false representation of reality” that “lures people into the belief that these places still fulfill their romantic expectations.”¹

But I think the problem goes beyond the issue of phonographic falsification. Our bodies and imaginations engage in sonic transcription and reproduction more than the machines we have invented for these purposes. For instance, we can have a much more striking perception of such a human sonic intrusion than does a microphone, or not perceive it at all, both in the moment it is heard and in the traces it has left in our memory. Do we always realize when there’s some distant traffic noise if our attention is focused on an insect call? Do we remember the nearby voices of people when we are recalling a day we enjoyed the sound of the rain in the forest? If not, was our experience—or what we have retained of it—false? Even if our level of consciousness includes both the traffic and the insect, do we have to embrace both of them in representing reality? Because this perceptual ambiguity is at the basis of our apprehension of “reality,” I don’t think a recording that has been “cleaned up” of human-made sounds is any more false than one that hasn’t.

I don’t believe that there is such a thing as the “objective” apprehension of sonic reality. Regardless of whether or not we are recording, our minds conceptualize an ideal of sound. And not only do different people listen differently, but the very temporality of our presence in a place is a form of editing. The spatial, material, and temporal transfigurations exist independently of phonography. Our idea of the sonic reality, even our fantasy about it, *is* the sonic reality each one of us possesses [...].

This Is Not *La Selva*: Sound Matter vs. Representation

“This is not a pipe”

—René Magritte

What you hear on *La Selva* is not *La Selva*. That is, *La Selva* (the musical piece) is not a representation of *La Selva* (the reserve in Costa Rica). While it certainly contains elements that can be understood as representational, the musical piece is rooted not in a documentary approach but in a notion of “sound matter” [...].

What I’m defending here is the transcendental dimension of the sound matter *itself*. In my conception, sound recording does not document or represent a richer and more significant “real” world. Rather, it focuses on the inner world of sounds. When the representational/relational level is emphasized, sounds acquire a restricted meaning or a goal, and this inner world is dissipated. I’m thus straightforwardly endorsing Pierre Schaeffer’s concepts of the “sound object” and of “reduced” or “acousmatic” listening.² I prefer the term “matter” to “object,” because I think it better reflects the continuity of the sonic material one finds in sound environments, a continuity affirmed by the non-representational approach to sound recording. I also prefer the term “profound” to the term “reduced” because the latter connotes simplification.

The richness of this sound matter in nature is astonishing, but to appreciate it in depth we have to face the challenge of profound listening. We have to shift the focus of our attention and understanding from representation to being [...] .

Environmental Acousmatics: The Hidden Cicada Paradox

Acousmatics, or the rupture of the visual cause-effect connection between the sound sources and the sounds themselves, can contribute significantly to the “blindness” of profound listening. Like most tropical rain forests, La Selva is a dynamic example of what we could call “environmental acousmatics.” There are many sounds in the forest, but one rarely has the opportunity to see the sources of most of those sounds. This is not only because the multitude of animals are hidden in the foliage. The foliage also obscures itself, concealing myriad plant sound sources, caused not only by wind or rain but by falling leaves and branches—a frequent occurrence in that forest.

Many animals in La Selva live in this acousmatic world, in which the rule is not to see their conspecifics, predators, or preys, but just to hear them. This acousmatic feature is best exemplified by one of the most characteristic sounds of La Selva: the strikingly loud and harsh song of the cicadas. During the day, this is probably the sound that typically would most naturally stand in the foreground of the sonic field. You hear it with an astonishing intensity and proximity. Yet, like a persistent paradox, you never see its source.

A Non-Bucolic Broadband World

Nature sound environments are often characterized as tranquil places, peaceful islands of quietude in a sea of rushing, noisy, human-driven habitats [...] While this notion might be true for certain natural environments and under certain conditions, I think it contributes to a restricted and bucolic view of nature that I don't share. Like many other tropical rain forests, La Selva is quite a noisy place. The diverse sounds of water (rain, watercourses), together with the sound web created by the intense calls of insects or frogs and plant sounds, make up a wonderfully powerful broadband sound environment of thrilling complexity. The textures are extremely rich, with multiple layers that merge with each other and reveal themselves by addition or subtraction, challenging one's perception and also the very notion of what an individual sound might be.

This contributes to expanding our aural understanding of nature, not by denying stillness but by embracing a more inclusive conception, freed of our judgment and reductive categorization. I'm certainly in favor of defending the “pristine” sound quality of natural environments, but for this reason: I think we should avoid the sound intrusion that leads to sonic homogenization, thus conserving the diversity of sounds in the world. In that spirit, I also support the preservation and enhancement of the diversity of human-made sound environments and devices. The value we assign to sound environments is a complex issue that we shouldn't simplify. Under some circumstances, nature can also be considered to be an intrusion in human-made sound environments. In this sense, my approach is as futurist as it is environmentalist [...] .

I consider *La Selva* to be a piece of music, but not in the classical sense of the word. Nor do I subscribe to the traditional concept of what is considered to be musical in nature, or how nature and music have been coupled—for example, the search for melodic patterns, comparisons between animal sounds and musical instruments, or “complementing” nature sounds with “musical” ones. To me, a waterfall is as musical as a birdsong.

I believe in expanding and transforming our concept of music through nature (and through “non-nature”), not in the absolute assignment of sounds to music (either in any restricted traditionally academic sense or in the Cagean universal version). Rather, it is my belief that music is an aesthetic (in its widest sense) perception/understanding/conception of sound. It's our *decision*—subjective, intentional, non-universal, not necessarily permanent—that converts nature sounds into music. We don't need to transform or complement the sounds. Nor do we need to pursue a universal and permanent assignment. It will arise when our listening moves away and is freed from being pragmatically and representationally oriented. And attaining this musical state requires a profound listening, an immersion in the *inside* of sound matter.

NOTES

1. David Dunn, “Nature, Sound Art, and the Sacred,” in *The Book of Music and Nature*, ed. David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 95–107.
2. See chap. 14, above.