

# Sonorities and Cities (in Times of Crisis)

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(Translated from Portuguese by Jorge de La Barre)

## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to explore some possibilities of hearing the city as a tool for an extended exploration and understanding of different aspects of urban dynamics and contradictions in socio-anthropological analysis. Starting from considerations of the secondary importance given to the sense of hearing in social research and theory, and the growing interest in the integration of all the senses for the construction of an embodied research apparatus which would contemplate the multidimensionality of everyday life, I explore two perspectives: the one contained in the different uses of the concept of *soundscape*, and the one referred to more recent appropriations of Henri Lefebvre's *rhythmanalysis*. Complementing the reflection, I use the theoretical suggestions based on sound perceptions, to produce some insights regarding the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on cities and everyday life.

*On rooftops TV antennas play urban music,  
On the streets the beggars with rotten bandages sing  
urban music,  
Motorcycles wanting attention at three in the morning  
– It's just urban music.  
-Renato Russo, "Música urbana 2"*

## Introduction

Do cities "sing" a "song?" How can we define "urban music?" What elements characterize it, and compose it? What can it tell us, what can it help us unveil about cities, and the sociability that develops in them? These are questions that emerge from the challenge of relating sounds and the city, or in other words, of reflecting on the possibilities of "listening to social life" (Fortuna; Hijiki) as a way of understanding urban dynamics and the various aspects of social relations in cities.

By registering various sounds – coming from the media, human voices (individuals who are not attentively heard in everyday life, besides being very audible), vehicles as parts of what is called "urban music," the song "Música urbana 2" quoted above – performed by Brazilian rock band Legião Urbana in the 1980s – points to the increasing attention that the combination of diverse sound events has received – as forms of expression within the city as a whole, or the relationships and contradictions taking place in it. Moreover, the soundscape described in the song points to the relationship between the presence of diverse, persistent and disruptive sounds, in the postmodern urban space.

The thematization of urban noise, its postmodern uses in musical compositions and performances signal a change in the perception of sounds, as a consequence of the increase in volume and diversity of urban noise on the one hand and, on the other, due to the constant presence of music in everyday life: from that conveyed by mass media, to the most diverse practices involving it. In this sense, in the field of sounds, one of the themes discussed in urban sociology stands out: that of the contrast between small towns or the countryside, with limited and more easily identifiable sound sources (in Western cities for example, the church bell is a marker of repetitive or exceptional events, as analyzed by Corbin), and large or medium-sized cities, marked by excesses, contrasts, overflows, globalized sounds and, sometimes also, the presence of more "traditional" sounds.

Regarding the progressive integration of noise, tension or dissonance, and new balances between noise, sound, and silence in the history of Western concert music, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Satie and Varèse may be considered decisive composers in their uses of noise in music (Wisnik; Attali) in two different ways: on the one hand, the implosion of tonal language and, on the other hand, the incorporation of urban noises in their compositions. As to this second trend, the futurist Luigi Russolo and the exponent of concrete music, Pierre Schaeffer, are frequently mentioned. According to Wisnik, the two fundamental tendencies in 20<sup>th</sup> century concert music, serialism, and minimalism, find their meeting point in the work of John Cage. In 1937 already, John Cage suggested that “Whereas, in the past the point of disagreement has been between dissonance and consonance, it will be, in the immediate future, between noise and so-called musical sounds” (4).

Delimiting the theme of this article in the negative, I do not propose to discuss the various ways in which music has been analyzed by the social sciences, either under the circumstances in which it was considered a central object, or when it was been taken as a “thermometer” of the development of Western society or its current state. The work of Max Weber can be cited, about the rationalization process in Western concert music; more contemporary authors such as Jacques Attali or José Miguel Wisnik also, on the relationships between the development of modern society and music, with an emphasis on music’s premonitory character with regards to social life. Similarly, it is almost mandatory to mention the works of Adorno (1980, 1994a and 1994b, to name but a few), and his analysis of musical production and reception in modern-rational societies, and the (im)possibilities of emancipation. As is well known, Adorno's reflections also point to the regression of listening in contemporary societies, under the impact of standardization and repetitiveness in popular music. Deafness is thus considered an auditory correspondent of alienation; it can also be considered as an effect of the constant exposure to sounds, and the supposed inability for the subject to rationally understand the underlying structures of music.

In anthropology, as in other human sciences, music has been considered, on the one hand, as an explanatory metaphor for other objects – the various works of Lévi-Strauss on myths are a good example. In particular, the entire *Mythologies* series uses musical metaphors as structural parameters in the analysis of myths. In the first volume of the series – *The Raw and the Cooked* (Lévi-Strauss) – the symphony and the fugue,

two compositional forms of Western classical music, cut across the entire analysis, being considered analogous to myths in terms of structure. On the other hand, there has been further discussion on the challenges and prospects for an anthropology of sound which includes music, but goes beyond it (Novak and Sakakeeny; Pinto; Rocha and Vedana).

What is proposed here is more in tune with the project of an anthropology or a sociology of sound in the city. Our perspective is one of a tentative convergence between urban sociology and anthropology regarding the analysis of social life through sonorities – socially organized sets of sounds, noises and silences which include music, but are not restricted to it. In such convergence, the concept of *everyday life* (Lefebvre 1992; 2008) is particularly interesting, as it situates the urban spaces of listening and their problematic, contradictory character, subjective and objective at the same time, and contributing to confer coherence to the empirical apprehension of sociability.

I begin with a brief reflection on the place of listening in the study of cities, then I move on to some considerations about the notion of *soundscape*, which functions as an instrument for the organization and the analysis of diverse auditory perceptions. I add a discussion on Henri Lefebvre's *rhythmanalysis* proposal – a concept that has been increasingly incorporated into human sciences research. In relation to Lefebvre's proposal, I highlight more particularly the situation of the field researcher-listener in contemporary urban context. With a double objective to, on the one hand, test the relevance of Lefebvre's proposal in the analysis of sounds in everyday life, and on the other hand, gain some insight in contemporary challenges, I draft an analysis of urban sounds under the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Listening and Studying Cities

In social science research and theoretical reflection, one still finds a strong hierarchization of the senses with a clear predominance of vision – usually referred to as the most “spiritual” sense in Western thought. In anthropology, visual metaphors proliferate when reflecting on both fieldwork or ethnographic writing. The anthropological lexicon has been primarily that of visuality: one seeks a *gaze* (“nearby and within,” as Magnani 2002 puts it) that allows to observe and reconstruct from various *perspectives*, the *point of view* of social agents – their *worldview*.

It is not accidental that the very sense of vision (*thea*, in Greek) is at the root of the word theory (Williams).

Leaving aside the framework of an anthropology of sound, when thematizing the “ethnographic ear” (Clifford 12), the issues raised mostly concern the attention given to the different voices of social actors and their presence in ethnographic research, within an interpretive paradigm. To these voices – best defined as narratives delivered from particular points of view, and “read” by those who interpret them – sonic metaphors such as that of polyphony, used by Canevacci, can also be applied when analyzing the urban context. Thus used, polyphony has nothing to do with *listening* to melodies, or soundscapes. Still in the field of anthropology or ethnomusicology, although one can speak of a growing interest in research on sounds in urban environments, music and sonorities have been much more widely used as a means of investigating systems of meaning and social relations in non-Western societies. There is still a gap regarding their application to studies of the cultural dynamics of cities (Schramm; Cruces). Some exceptions can be found, as exemplified by Finnegan's well-known ethnographic work on diverse music practices in an English city, or by the vast body of work on music scenes.

In the field of sociology, music has been relatively little analyzed as part of the sonorities set in motion in cities, and has been considered much more frequently in its aesthetic forms (styles, genres) and as a commodity in contemporary society, including with regards to the culture industry, ideology, reception, identity and lifestyle formations, especially among the younger generations, within several theoretical lineages – some of them mentioned above. The most interesting contributions to a more integral exploration of sonorities taken as a revealer for fundamental elements in urban life are based on approaches related to the sociology of everyday life; they seek to approach the specific uses and meanings of sound forms as elements that re-signify or construct social relations and identities, as exemplified by the works of Bull (2000), DeNora, and Frith.

However, for a long time, the sound and auditory dimensions have been left aside, or poorly elaborated in social theory. Within the framework of a predominantly visual culture in which writing has, from an intellectual point of view, a higher symbolic value (Baitello Junior), the exploration of the possibilities of mobilizing other senses in social research has been clearly marginalized. The importance of the visual in modern culture has

also impacted the ways in which social relations are represented in scientific analysis. *Soundscape* and *rhythmanalysis*, analyzed below as concepts that imply a specific epistemological stance, refer to the multidimensional, synesthetic character of all experience, including field experience. Perhaps, the resonance of these concepts can be also considered as a way to broaden the representational regime of the social sciences.

Considering some authors of reference in the field of urban studies, one cannot deny the predominance of the sense of vision. Classics, such as Georg Simmel (1981; 1983), or Walter Benjamin, valued the senses as instruments to approach social reality, and contributed to the consolidation of a paradigm of analysis of cities strongly based on apprehensions through the senses. Yet, they relegated listening to a second plan. For these authors, walking by and gazing are the fundamental planes of observation of cities. The auditory dimension, maybe more than other sensitive dimensions, was indeed considered in descriptions of urban life. But it still highlights the predominance of the sense of vision as a way of exploring urban sociability. Even the re-readings of such authors often placed more emphasis on the visual aspects of their analyses (Bull 2000).

Gradually, the lexicon of the social sciences has been incorporating polyphony and polyrhythm, the noises and the silences of social life. But now, these terms begin to refer to the complementarity of listening among other senses in socio-anthropological research. Theoretical reflection on listening in everyday urban life is also being fed by perceptions regarding the growing involvement of sound in the process of identity and boundary (re)formations between public and private, ethnic and non-ethnic, religious and profane spaces (Connel and Gibson).

As it has been pointed out, the sounds and rhythms, in general, have not only been changing since the establishment of the urban-industrial society; they are also markers of socio-spatial and cultural differences taking place within and at the borders of cities, also pointing to the intersections between the local and the global. Certain sounds – such as that of cell phones, the urban noise of cars and sirens, the movement of airports, credit card machines – have become globalized (Fortuna), just as certain musical genres such as rock, pop, and rap. Other sounds, such as the cries of street vendors, and the songs of street musicians (Tinhorão) – even the rhythms of speech, the arrangement (quantity and quality) of urban noises or the typical musical sonorities of certain regions may be

analyzed as social markers of place, and as indicators of the co-presence of multiple temporalities and identities.

### **Soundscape: A Useful Concept?**

Despite the distinction made above between sound elements that signal more globalized or more localized social relations, when we *listen* to a given city, we hear it, at first, as an undifferentiated set, as cacophony, the product of an imbrication of several sound events coming from a diversity of sources that come and go, according to the social and natural rhythms such as those of work and leisure, movement and rest, the change of seasons, day and night. It is such seemingly chaotic scenario that the concept of soundscape can help describe and analyze. The notion helps to put the aural dimension in focus, and the highlighting of soundscapes as a privileged point of attention can, in my view, broaden our understanding about social experience, given the particularities of such dimension.

Raymond Murray Schafer (1933-2021), a Canadian musician, music educator and theorist, began to develop from the late 1960s, an enormous sound recording project within an ecological perspective – the World Soundscape Project – and elaborated in the 1970s a definition of soundscape, thus creating an operational notion for empirical research. In his conception, the notion refers to a “field of interactions” and study, which can be delimited by the researcher according to his object of study. A piece of music, a radio program, a closed room, or even an acoustic environment as extensive as metropolises – all can be approached through the notion of soundscape. Schafer left his mark on this reflection, and this is expressed in the numerous soundscape recording projects and analyses inspired by him. The expansive nature of Schafer's project materialized in 1993, with the creation of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (Bastos; Fonterrada).

The connection between the “Soundscape Project” and the education of listening, along with the intention of training good listeners in order to support the development of musical practice, were important drives in Schafer's work as a music educator; his concept of Creative Music Education is still considered relevant to the present (Fonterrada; Rutherford). However, for the purposes of this article, it is more important to underline the connection between the *soundscape* concept and the development of a new field of study: acoustic ecology. As Bastos ponders about the productive and restrictive aspects of the

ecological perspective, on the one hand, the aggressiveness of urban noise needs to be considered and contained, especially when it comes to the balance of social relations and public health issues; on the other hand, caution is needed regarding the establishment of supposedly universal regulatory standards and the moralizing, restrictive aspects of *soundscape* “depollution,” especially when they affect segments of the population that already are discriminated or marginalized. In short, it is not possible to establish universal parameters for the “tuning of the world” (Schafer), and it is necessary to consider these critical notes when doing research on urban sonorities.

That being said, from the perspective of studying the sonorities of/in the city, it is worth mentioning how Schafer qualifies *urban soundscapes*. In his analysis, Schafer differentiates urban landscapes from rural ones, especially by measuring the noise levels – which leads him to qualify the urban landscapes as lo-fi (low fidelity), and the rural ones as hi-fi (high fidelity). The diversity and intensity of urban noises are treated as “noise pollution;” it would then be appropriate, in the ecological perspective that the author professes, to “clean” the environment and “preserve” or “rescue” certain sounds, eliminating others. Cities, machines, and the technological means of reproducing recorded music would create “sound walls” that would isolate individuals from their own environment. Bull (2000) gives an interesting example of how natural noises can be seen as “pollution” in certain circumstances: the sound of the ocean waves disturbing a cell phone conversation from the deck of a ship. But the most relevant critique of Schafer's formulation concerns the very notion of city that would lie behind his conception – detached from the set of cultural practices that constitute the urban soundscape (Arkett).

Schafer's perspective would then lead to ignoring two important issues for the type of analysis proposed here. The first concerns the historical and socio-anthropological formation of the senses: socially accumulated experiences play a fundamental role in the formation of listening, as well as the other senses. The second question refers to the possibilities offered by listening to the sounds existing in the urban context, for an understanding of the relations between different (and sometimes unequal) ethnic, national, generational groups and social classes, living and circulating in the city. In this sense, Bastos defends the idea of an ethical, and necessarily politicized listening. Thus, coming back to the notion of soundscape, we must retain these critiques, and detach them from the *a priori* hierarchization between urban and rural landscapes based on the physical-acoustic characteristics of sound, in favor of a

contextual analysis which emphasizes their significations within the ensemble of sound relations in society.

Very briefly, I would also like to comment on two epistemological critiques that point to the limiting aspects of the concept of soundscape: those formulated by Steven Feld and Tim Ingold, respectively. Summarizing Feld's argument, he proposes an acoustical epistemology, synthesized in his concept of *acoustemology*; his stance implies facing the research field through the question: "How the dynamism of sound's physical energy indexes its social immediacy" (Feld 12). In Feld's words, "Acoustemology refuses to sonically analogize or appropriate 'landscape' with all its physical distance from agency and perception" (Feld 15). In asserting this, Feld endorses Ingold's argument against *soundscape*, in considering that the concept should be abandoned once and for all, because it produces a misleading definition of sound. For Ingold, sound, just like light in visual studies, should be conceived as a medium through which the landscape is perceived. Considering the integration of the five senses in social research, Ingold's strongest argument, in my view, concerns the idea according to which the concept of landscape already contains the sound dimension; in other words, subjects are immersed in the landscape, and experience it in a multisensory fashion.

However, two questions emerge. The first one is: wouldn't it be a reification of landscape as a given object to consider that there is no such thing as a *soundscape*, but that landscape can be perceived by sound? The second, more practical and less methodological, is: which researchers actually approach the aural dimension when they analyze landscapes? Despite all the criticism that could be directed to Schafer's conception of *soundscape*, it is worth remembering that one of the most important legacies of his work was to make explicit the constant emphasis on the visual dimension in landscape descriptions and analyses. Schafer converted visual notions into aural notions. As Mitch Akiyama (56, quoted in Sterne 182) emphasizes,

Landmarks become "soundmarks," clairvoyance becomes "clairaudience," and eyewitnesses were recast as "earwitnesses." [...] Schafer's neologisms alert us to the invisibility and banality of visual metaphors by reimagining language as implicitly aural.

Thus, despite these reservations, Schafer's pioneering work is to be valued for having created a precise terminology to define a field of studies under construction, opening new horizons for researchers on

sonorities. The absence of boundaries in the auditory space stimulates the questioning about the collection of sound objects, the multilocal insertion of urban ethnographies, or the permeability between spaces. As Rocha and Vedana (9) suggest,

The notion of soundscape can also be thought of from a sociological point of view... Soundscapes are interpreted from a perceptual unity that brings together, at the same time, the sounds and forms of collective life from the listening points of the anthropologist within the very event to be ethnographically described.

Rather than considering the concepts derived from “scape” as a fragmentation of the research field or of social experience itself (as Ingold states), it could be argued that these metaphorical notions highlight some previously obliterated aspects of social reality, and contribute in the construction of new research objects. An example of this is that through notions derived from landscape, one may qualify the scenarios in which the globalization processes emerge and define subjects, objects, social relations, and meanings that are specific. In this sense, Appadurai highlights five fundamental scenarios based on the landscape metaphor, to understand transnational interactions: ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes, and ideoscapescapes. Mediascapescapes and ethnoscapescapes, in particular, find strong elements of their characterization in sonorities: the former, with the wide dissemination of mainstream pop and other global musical genres; the latter, with the strong presence of music in the “baggage” of the African diaspora (Gilroy). One could also say that mediascapescapes and ethnoscapescapes intersect in the field of world music, and play an important role in shaping the soundscape of diaspora and anti-racist protest.

Another interesting aspect is, in cases where cities have expressive musical elements of urban identity or characterizing genres, the notion of soundscape allows to articulate the treatment of these intangible assets as brands, or images of the city. Some cities around the globe distinguish themselves by having a sound image well delimited by a musical genre. This is the case of New Orleans with jazz, of Buenos Aires with tango, Seville and other cities in Andalusia with flamenco, Vienna with waltz, and Rio de Janeiro with samba. However, even cities strongly identified with one musical genre are marked by a plurality of musical practices. The various musical scenes or communities in a city can articulate or relate to each other, agonistically. I have discussed in previous work (Mendonça 2020), the case of the mangubeat scene in Recife (capital of

the State of Pernambuco, Brazil), which holds cultural and sonic diversity as a fundamental feature, recombining local musical traditions (frevo, maracatu, embolada, among other genres), with globalized sounds.

In summary, the notion of *soundscape* allows us to apprehend and organize the multiple cultural flows that cross cities, and perceive continuities and discontinuities in relation with the various urban experiences. However, the most fruitful analytical potential of the notion depends on freeing it from the limitations of the ecological “listening,” from the task of “tuning the world.” By evoking time and space, the notion can incorporate the diversity of temporalities and localities of the contents that are arranged in a specific urban context, the simultaneous and successive occurrence of various sound events – allowing for the exploration of the sensitive, conscious, and unconscious dimensions of the relationships established in the city. In this more general sense, *soundscape* resonates with some aspects of *rhythmanalysis*.

### **On the (Sound)Tracks of Lefebvre**

We have been dealing here with the integration of listening – not discarding vision – in the exploration of everyday life in cities. One of the urban thinkers who pioneered the proposal for a research program based on the integration of the two senses was Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991); his *rhythmanalysis* was launched at the end of the third volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* (Lefebvre 2008 [1981]), and developed in *Éléments de Rythmanalyse. Introduction à la connaissance des rythmes* (Lefebvre 1992) – a book that was only published after his death. It is also worth mentioning that the term *rhythmanalysis* can be found in some of the author's long career earlier works (Frehse).

The importance of Lefebvre's work for various research areas in the human sciences, and especially urban studies, is widely recognized. There has been in recent years, an increased use of *rhythmanalysis* in various studies, including studies focusing specifically on urban music and sonorities. A quick search on academic search engines displays thousands of publications related to *rhythmanalysis*. In fact, the growth in the number of articles of theoretical reflection and empirical analysis grounded in *rhythmanalysis* is most prominent in the years following the book's translation into English (Lefebvre 2004).

The task of conducting an in-depth exposition and scrutiny of *rhythmanalysis* goes far beyond the ambitions of the present article.

However, it is at least necessary to remember, as Elden and Frehse have, that *rhythmanalysis* is closely related to Lefebvre's project of the critique of everyday life, developed over several decades. From the author's broad spectrum of reflections on the subject, I would like to highlight two aspects. The first one concerns his reflections about *rhythmanalysis* as a methodological perspective, situating the researcher – the rhythmanalyst – between the scientist and the poet. It is his physical *presence*, the experience, the corporeality of the rhythmanalyst using his body as a metronome in relation to cyclical and linear times, that guarantees the dialectic between proximity and distance, which situates her/him as an observer-participant, somehow comparable to the urban anthropologist – the centrality of experience is a source of knowledge in urban life and situates them side by side, just as does the dynamics between proximity and distance, identity and alterity. As Rocha and Vedana (14) state,

Conducting ethnographies of sound in the city thus attaches considerable importance to other ethnographic practices within urban anthropology which have been generally excluded for a long time from their fields of concern, namely, the role of emotions, affections, sensations, the imaginal as a participant in the construction of ethnographic representation of modern urban-industrial cities.

The importance of *presence* for *rhythmanalysis* makes it possible to balance the use of the senses, giving relevance to listening (in addition to the *voices* of social subjects, so present in the so-called “postmodern” anthropology), and combining it with looking, coordinating time and space, synchrony, and diachrony in the perception of concomitant or alternated cyclical, linear rhythms. It is in the rhythms that Lefebvre (1992 52) will locate the possibilities of exploring the fractures of the quotidian, and of finding the genuine “urban music”:

Rhythms. Rhythms. They reveal and they hide. Much more diverse than in music, or the so-called civil code of successions, relatively simple texts in relation to the city. Rhythms: the music of the city, a scene that listens to itself, an image in the present of a discontinuous sum. Rhythms perceived from the invisible window, pierced into the wall of the façade... But next to the other windows, it is also within a rhythm that escapes it...

Like the urban ethnographer in large metropolises, there is always something that escapes from the multiplicity of perceptions. In a certain sense, the figure of the rhythmanalyst could also be compared to that of the *flâneur* (developed by Benjamin), or the stranger (as defined by

Simmel), as they both configure privileged positions of observation of the urban landscape, although dominated by the sense of vision. But the *flâneur* and the stranger distance themselves from both the ethnographer and the rhythm analyst, for performing an anthropology that is characterized more as “of passing,” as defined by Magnani.

A starting point for the observation of “urban music” that Lefebvre refers to, in addition to the many others suggested by the author throughout his book, is the attention to differences in the occupation of public spaces associated with social class distinctions. The “popular” occupation, especially in Brazil, is extremely noisy, marked by the cries of street vendors or peddlers, by loudspeakers that literally shout announcements and radio hits, by voices that rise without any concern, contrasting with a more “well-behaved” occupation of public spaces by the middle and upper classes.

The second and last point to be raised from Lefebvre's discussion on *rhythm analysis* concerns his questioning about the study of musical rhythms. He asks whether rhythms are still under-explored in the study of musical time. Lefebvre reminds us that one of the characteristics of so-called “modern” music holds the intense presence of “exotic” rhythms as one of its main characteristics. Authors located in other disciplinary perspectives, cited above (Wisnik; Attali), talk about the dominance of the pulse, that is, of rhythm in contemporary music. Lefebvre (2004 65) states a point that he considers central: “By and through rhythm, music becomes worldly [*se mondialise*],” stressing that rhythm has a greater importance than melody or harmony. The growing importance of popular music genres for which rhythm is central as they emerge from global soundscapes such as rock and rap would confirm Lefebvre's intuition. Moreover, within the research program that *rhythm analysis* proposes, we would also find a clue to explain the ever more constant presence of Brazilian music (I am thinking mainly of the percussive forms of samba, Afro-Bahian music, or more recently, bregafunk), as an expression coming from Brazilian immigrants and Brazilian commercial music in international contexts.

Bridging the gap between *rhythm analysis* and *soundscapes* as heuristic resources, in the case of the concept of *soundscape*, its various appropriations tend to dilute the links with the theoretical framework originally proposed by Schafer (Kelmer). The rejection of the limitations of the sound ecology perspective may be seen as a theoretical gain in that it allows the researcher to more appropriately contemplate the

socio-historical construction of the auditory dimension. In the case of *rhythmanalysis*, its transformation into a mere analysis of rhythms, detached from Lefebvre's strong concept of everyday life, could lead to a weakening of the ability to register and analyze the interweaving of different histories and relations that constitute the rhythms lived socially. In order to test some of the elements unfolded in this debate, I propose a brief description and analysis of sounds and rhythms during the period of social isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Sonorities in Times of Crisis

While the connection between capitalist society and crises at various levels is a well-known debate and has been the subject of many analyses in the social sciences, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed fractures previously existing in the social fabric, and brought new global challenges. Thus, it soon became an object of reflection not only for scientists directly involved in epidemiological research, but also for scientists in almost all disciplines including the social sciences and, within them, research on music and sonorities.

In Brazil, the National Association of Post-Graduation in Social Sciences (ANPOCS) started to publish a bulletin with analyses of various themes, written by social scientists "in the heat of the hour," about the pandemic crisis. A book, gathering 150 texts from the bulletin, was released in late 2020 (Grossi and Toniol). The Working in Music International Research Network has launched calls for brief analyses and reports on the work of artists and other professionals in the music industry during the pandemic. These are published in their blog [Working in Music](#). The University of Firenze organized the [Sounds of the Pandemic conference](#) in December 2020, featuring papers from various researchers in the field of music and sound.

The global scale of the human tragedy, and the disruption in the usual socioeconomic flows of production, circulation, and consumption have shown their face in daily routines, and their auditory dimension became perceptible. Considering the evident disruption of the rhythms of everyday life, and being inspired by the third chapter of Lefebvre's book (2004), I propose an exploration of what was seen and heard "from my window," throughout the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I was also inspired by the auto-ethnography conducted by [Varoğlu](#), who based her observation on the changes in her routine as a "home scholar"

during quarantine, and her analysis of the contradictions that emerged from such unique situation, regarding *rhythmanalysis*. The Turkish sociologist also notes that Lefebvre's theoretical framework contemplates not only class inequalities but also gender inequalities, allowing to analyze the impact of both on social rhythms. I propose this fragmentary sketch as an experiment, although I am fully aware of its limitations and provisional character, regarding the limits of a listening practice from a window in Recife, Brazil – although this window is connected to many other windows around the world, through the internet, social, and mass media. My intention is to capture changes in rhythms that point to social tensions precisely, and the acquired meanings of sounds, noises, and silence as a result of the pandemic shock.

As does Varoğlu, I focus on the period between March and July 2020. And, as it may be known, the lack of a consistent federal policy in addressing the pandemic crisis has meant that the responsibility for deciding whether or not to begin a period of quarantine or limitation of activities was shifted to the local and state governments. Since March 16, 2020, there have been intermittent periods of work and leisure restrictions, in the Metropolitan Region of Recife and the State of Pernambuco, as to decrease the intensity of social contacts and the pace of transmission. Since that day, public universities in Pernambuco had to interrupt face-to-face activities, while online research and teaching were becoming routine activities; while I finish writing this article, the blurring of the fine line between work and leisure times and spaces has only increased. There is no reliable prevision about when we will be able to return to face-to-face activities, with all the required sanitary precautions. The uncertain question about how long the restrictions to mobility, and the interruption of the “normal” rhythm of daily routine will remain, in and out of the city, causes many of us to feel arrhythmia. I then put myself in the position of the rhythmanalyst, and I situate my listening between the poetic and the scientific.

In the beginning, there was silence... Silence in the interruption of the ordinary rhythms of capitalist production and circulation, when the engines of machines and vehicles stopped, and the constant coming and going of cars and buses decreased significantly for it had become a necessity to stay at home. Silence left by the absence of airplanes landing. Silence of the workers' footsteps (maids, street vendors, delivery men among others), who could not afford to interrupt their work activities. No wonder, the first death by Covid-19 recorded in Rio de

Janeiro was that of a housemaid – one of the subjects little heard in everyday life. In the beginning, there was silence, the silence of the circulation of our “enemy” the virus; the silence of fear and despair; the silence of hearse cars, funerals without funerals, departures without goodbyes, deaths. As Lefebvre (2008 166) states, “Modern society disposes of death. People no longer die; they disappear.” With his Marxian inspiration, the sociologist recognizes the role of destruction to give impetus to a new phase of capitalist accumulation. But is it still possible to stay deaf to human tragedy?

And silence was full of sounds: the sound of ambulance sirens, increasingly noticeable against the backdrop of silence; from time to time, the rhythms, already altered, were shaken by the shouts of people wandering the streets, totally out of a “normal” emotional balance, making mental illness audible. The sounds were also internal, not just illness but also, the shattered projects – especially those involving meetings and mobilities. From the windows, protests against the federal government were also held – often coinciding with the times of the president’s pronouncements on television. In these protests, the sounds of banging pots echoed in a multiplicity of timbres and volumes, making proximities and distances audible as well. The banging of pots was punctuated by cries of “Fora Bolsonaro,” clearly demonstrating the discontent with the disastrous management regarding the health and economic crisis, coming from a significant portion of the Brazilian population; the president clearly turned a deaf ear to scientific recommendations, and to the suffering of citizens. The ambivalent meanings – permanence and change; peace and despair; impotence and struggle – associated with noises, sounds, and silence exposed the contradictions inherent in our social relations, and the articulation between social and natural rhythms.

There was also the silence of peace, solitude, and meditation. Even though working online demanded a lot of energy and effort from us to adapt, more time and space was gained to direct our attention to our subjective and bodily rhythms. The sounds and movements of nature became more audible and visible: a pair of *carcarás* (birds similar to the hawk, typical of northeastern Brazil – see Fig. 1), set down to live nearby, while their calls could be heard especially in the early morning; the chirping of more common birds such as buzzards and sparrows; in the late afternoon and evening, the song of cicadas and crickets, and the croaking and hissing of frogs, which multiplied in the neighborhood; and the soothing silence of the flitting butterflies. Nature amplified its

manifestations and songs, showing by contrast, how much it was silenced by our predatory development model. Ultimately, I wonder if Schafer would not be at least partially correct: our mode of civilization made us submerged in an ocean of noise pollution; it turned us objectified people also by our ears, by the very ways in which the rhythms of capital have colonized our subjectivity.



Fig. 1. A pair of carcarás, “from my window,” 2020. Photograph: Luciana F. M. Mendonça.

Perhaps, at this point, Schafer and Lefebvre meet. Here and now, the sensitive dimension is placed in the main focus:

The **sensible**, this scandal of philosophers from Plato to Hegel, (re)takes primacy, transformed without magic (without metaphysics). Nothing inert in the *world*, **no things**: very diverse rhythms, slow or lively (in relation to *us*). (Lefebvre 2004: 17 – emphasis in the original)

## Conclusion

Concluding this exploration journey in sound and hearing as a means of understanding urban life, I summarize three fundamental points that I hope I have grounded throughout the text, and I add a very brief comment about social experience in times of pandemic. The first point concerns the openings and possibilities provided by a more consistent and reflexive engagement of listening, in the exploration of urban everyday life. By establishing a completely different relationship to space than visual barriers, sound barriers or permeabilities allow us to explore

other kinds of dimensions between places, or between collective identities. For this reason, sound can be a medium that brings complementary contributions to the exploration of the city as a “network of networks” (Hannerz), and as an environment where social inequalities and cultural differences are experienced.

The second point relates to the notion of *soundscape*, and to how it may help to organize the observation of urban sound environments, to articulate also the musical and non-musical dimensions (and their intertwining) of hearing the city. Mentioned above are some examples of cities that have a musical image of their own. And what about cities that, from the point of view of voices or the combination of sounds, have quite unique characteristics, but do not have a striking sound image? What social and historical factors contribute to the singularization – or not – of certain cities from their sound? These are questions that remain in the air, awaiting future investigations.

The third point concerns the program of *rhythmanalysis*, established by Lefebvre. Increasingly explored, it allows for a reflection on the researcher’s *presence* in the field – bodily, integral, mobilizing all senses. Furthermore, it allows for the incorporation of a reflection on power, domination, reproduction or the possibilities of emancipation in urban everyday life, more clearly than in the framework of what has been proposed by the anthropology of sound. What remains, then, is the invitation to explore new terrains with attentive ears.

Finally, this attentive ear is needed more than ever to reimagine the post-pandemic city and develop a renewed critique of everyday life. Observing and reflecting (or resonating) have also revealed their powers as “remedies,” as ways of finding a new eurythmy.

**Note:** This text is an updated version of a paper originally published in Portuguese some twelve years ago (Mendonça 2009). Considering the increased academic production regarding sounds and the city over the last decade, my attempt here is to update the debate, taking also into account the current context of the pandemic. I thank Jorge de La Barre for the extremely careful and respectful translation of the text.

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