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Being-with-ears: How Christian Benning Opened My Ears to the Soundscapes of New York City and Beyond

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Abstract

This writing explores the phenomenology of everyday urban sounds, some generic, others more place specific sounds to New York, or particular places within New York with samplings from Manhattan, the Queensboro Bridge and Queens. It takes the perspective of a walker and Environmental Psychologist, a commuter on the way to work. The experience was inspired and made possible by a recital by multi-percussionist Christian Benning that introduced listeners to different sounds and music. In this writing "New York City in transformation" refers to the transformation of sounds via the experience of walking, and the transformation experienced through a newfound aesthetic and meaning to sounds as my ears had been opened: everyday sounds that previously escaped my attention, sounds that I have taken for granted, or considered as a nuisance, have transformed from noise to sound (from Krach to Klang). Being-with-ears can be a way of being more present and taking more delight by being attuned to the sounds and potential songs of one's everyday environment.

Keywords: Sound, Music, Walking, Being

Ordinary Ears

I have always taken my ears and hearing for granted: To listen, to listen for traffic, particularly as a walker and runner (Imamichi, 2014, 2019). (I refer to ears not merely to the outer part, but for the whole auditory system that makes hearing possible.) Ears are additional sensors that "watch-out" for potential danger. The traffic from around the corner or from behind, anything outside one's field of vision can be perceived via one's ears. Moreover, there are plenty of other sounds that are not necessarily associated with potential danger, and play an essential role in one's life, such as music, listening to it, and making it. My being- with-ears seemed to have been transformed after attending a salon concert of multi-percussionist Christian F. Benning at the residence of the German Consul General David Gil on March 3, 2020. Benning is an accomplished early career German multi-percussionist (https://www.christianbenning.de/neue-seite) who at the time was on tour with a stop at New York. The program followed a similar repertoire of a live stream studio concert that is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=rMBPUi0pw4s

As much as the arts can be about the experience of the moment and something that takes one away from everyday life, it is also very much about what comes after with some lasting effects. The power of the arts is that they can transform the way one experiences the world and the way one walks through life, literally. It can transform one's *in-der-Welt-sein* or being-in-the-world, the phrase often associated with Heidegger (1927), and first introduced to Western audiences by Kakuzo Okakura in 1906 in the *Book of Tea* (Imamichi, 2004). The *Book of Tea* introduces the reader to the significance of the seemingly mundane and "the art of being in the world." Being-with-ears is an experience of being more present, more aware, and appreciative of one's everyday environment. The day after that percussion recital, on my walk to work, I felt, or should I say heard, that my everyday environment was transformed.

Walking

My commute involves a walk through Manhattan over the Queensboro Bridge into Queens. The walk begins at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and ends in Long Island City at LaGuardia Community College. It is about four miles and takes just over an hour. I am getting to move my body through some rather interesting urban scenery with much variety- from

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walking in the valley of skyscrapers of Midtown Manhattan to the peak of the Queensboro Bridge, from centers of tourist attractions such as Rockefeller Center to the periphery off the beaten path, a side street leading to campus. (See Figure 1.) De Certeau's (1984) chapter on Walking the City juxtaposes the city viewed from above versus being walked on the ground. Traversing a bridge puts one in an interesting in-between. Not just between shores, but being in a way above the streets (of Eastern Manhattan, Roosevelt Island, and Western Queens) and yet one is still on a street, partly out and in the city's grasp, partly detached and engaged, epitomizing my relationship to the city.

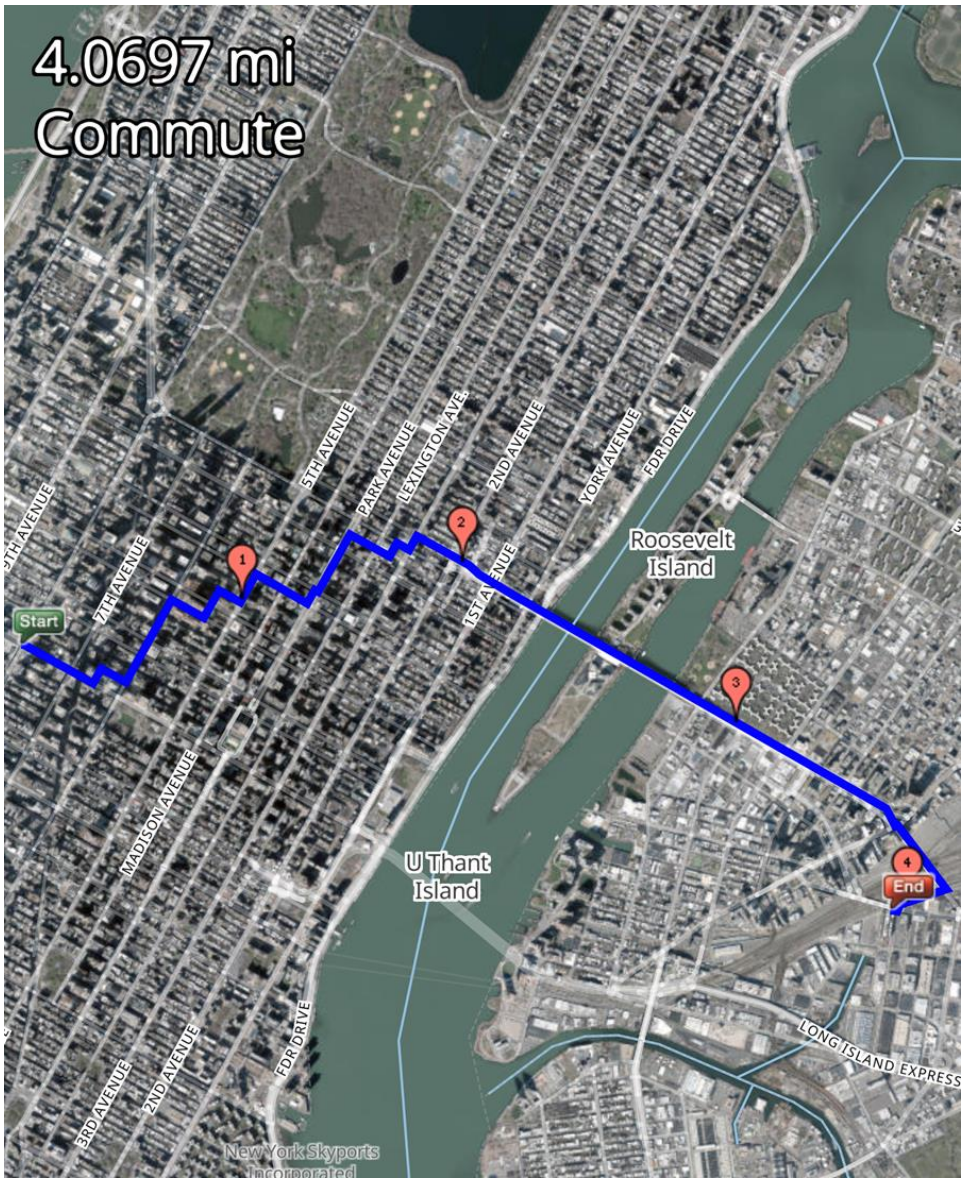

Figure 1. Map 1 by Tomoaki D. Imamichi

I could cut my commuting time by taking the subway, but, in addition to having to pay $2.75, I would deprive myself of a priceless walking experience. Much praise has been given to walking (Solnit, 2000; Gros, 2014; O'Mara, 2020).

In the context of COVID, whether it is to reduce the risks for infections or subway attacks, it makes walking an even more compelling transportation alternative. In a more general sense walking can be seen as a way to maintain one's physical health as a form of exercise, a way to reduce one's ecological footprint, and a way of knowing. Walking is a way of knowing (Bates & Rhyes-Tyler, 2017; Springgay & Truman, 2018), which one can associate walking with methodologies and epistemologies. Walking is a way of being. It is through walking in which one can get to know the environment, know oneself and others and potentially transform one's relationship with the world. There is much to be gained from walking, and much of it can come in unanticipated ways.

The walk, the commute through the city after the day of the percussion recital that has become the subject of this writing, allowed me to process the percussion recital of the previous night. The walk and subsequent walks and runs gave me something additional to direct my attention to and appreciate, and analyze the environment. This could be described as a transformation from "having ears" to "being-with-ears."

Walking with Ears

The percussion recital alone nor the walk alone would have led to this: It was the combination of the percussion performance that introduced different sounds with the subsequent walk through a sound-filled environment.

Much has been written on walking, but they do not mention that much about sounds. Or perhaps I have not given much attention to the mentioning of sounds when reading about them. In the field of urban studies, there is a predominance of the sense of vision (Mendonça, 2022; Bull, 2000). I do know that on the day after the percussion recital, I was much more attuned to the soundtrack that came with the scenery. Generally speaking, I tend to tune out so that I almost do not hear the continuous background noise of traffic, subway rumbling, the constant noise of construction sites of a city that always seems in the making. These are the everyday sounds that one tends to avoid. These are also the unfortunate everyday sounds associated with hearing loss, increased

stress, and interference with learning. Adverse effects of sounds have been demonstrated in a comparisons of classrooms that were subject to noise from elevated train tracks and those that were not (Bronzaft & McCarthy, 1975) or comparisons of impacts on schoolchildren from noise from flight paths associated with an old airport closing and a new airport opening (Hygge et al., 2002). The absence of such city sounds is something many seek out, whether it through soundproofing walls and windows, noise cancellation technologies or to be masked through other sounds ranging from music to fake nature sounds. Schafer (1977) also differentiated urban and rural soundscapes, just as restorative environment research have also explored the impacts of sounds- sounds are often juxtaposed with annoying city sounds and calming nature sounds, trying to further solidify the "bad city" and "good nature" paradigm of suburban psychologists (c.f. Gifford, 2014). Views of a brick wall versus trees may influence recovery from surgery (Ulrich, 1984), but not all cityscapes are epitomized in empty brick walls. One can think of murals, painted brick walls, and one can think of vertical gardens, overgrown brick walls. Thus city and nature do not need to be mutually exclusive. While there may not be immediate associations with "ugly nature", nature can be threatening in the form of natural disasters and unpleasant as in mosquito sounds and bites. At the same time there are pleasant cityscapes, beautiful visuals and calming sounds, associated with culture and the presence of people- such as the soothing background noise of a café that some people seek out and prefer over silence. But then again there is also the nuisance of bars and nightclubs, or house parties with loud music and loud people that are especially annoying when one is not invited. For the most part we take our lifeworld and the experiences within it for granted, unless it changes (Seamon, 2018). In my particular case, it appears that my experience within my lifeworld has changed through a percussion recital that gave more delight to my everyday encounters as my ears had been opened.

Waking up to Sound

Striking about the percussion recital was the versatility and the wide range of percussion. The instruments performed ranged from a single Snare Drum to Marimba (with a wide tonal range) and Multi-percussion. The pieces performed ranged from an arrangement of the classical Bach (or Beethoven in the live stream studio concert mentioned earlier) to the contemporary Benning himself. Beyond the initial association of loud hitting sounds, and interesting rhythms, percussion can produce a variety of sounds, even a single Snare Drum can produce different tonalities and

long sustains notes, sometimes created by sustained drumming that are experienced as one long note. Percussion sounds are not just produced by hitting, but also by brushing. The performance introduced the audience to a variety of formal percussion instruments, each coming with their own sound qualities and charm. The performance also demonstrated that almost anything can become a sound-producing instrument: floors, note stands, the drums sticks themselves. Depending on where and how something is hit it can produce a variety of different sounds. Almost any everyday sound can be replicated and turned into a song. Sounds tell us so much about objects and the environment. Sounds, just as other stimuli (c.f. Dewey, 1896), are not something that we passively receive, it is something that we actively listen for- what sounds to tune into, and what sounds to tune out, and actively initiate to find out more about an object:

We may knock on something to gage qualities or diagnose by hearing something like heavy/light, thick/thin, full/empty-hollow, strong/weak, intact/broken, and when something "does not sound right." Thus the physical properties of an environment or objects (c.f. affordances, Gibson, 1979) are not only recognized visually, they can be recognized auditory as well. By the sound qualities one can gauge the characteristics about an object or environment, which at times can inform one better than visual cues. But beyond gaging the qualities, sounds can be enjoyed as well. Physical properties of environments and objects include the sounds they produce.

There are also material qualities such as wooden, metallic, glassy, plastic, and rocky and possibly more evaluative qualities such as precious/cheap, real/fake. Sounds may convey emotional qualities as well- the stop and go traffic with excessive acceleration and breaking, the hissing sounds from the air brakes of trucks and buses, they convey aggression, impatience, and urgency.

In this regard everything seems more alive. It is not just the sound of the engines, it is the sound of where the rubber meets the injured road with its many potholes and cracks that reveal the vehicles laboring over the crumbling infrastructure wearing each other out. One could feel sorry for the many objects that seem to sound out their agony of their mistreatment. They deserve better. We deserve better.

Speaking of the rubber meeting the road: The sound of the same wheels on the same road can vary a lot depending on the road conditions impacted by weather: There is the regular rustling of dry and clean roads,

and then there is wet sticky sound of rain, snowy crunchy sound, slushy sound of melting snow, and sandy salty sound of tires rolling by. Weather and road conditions alter the soundscape of one's commute.

Sound All Around

Sounds add to an interesting spatial experience- there are so many different sounds coming from all directions particularly in a city- they come from different sides (vehicles humming to the left, to the right, in front, and behind me), from above (construction hammering and drilling, helicopters, or an airplane when not drowned out by other sounds) and below (subway rumbling).

The Queensboro Bridge that connects Manhattan and Queens is a transition zone. For those who have experienced the New York City Marathon, this is the "Quiet Zone," one of the few places without roaring spectators, but quiet is only a relative term, as there seems to be always sound if one listens.

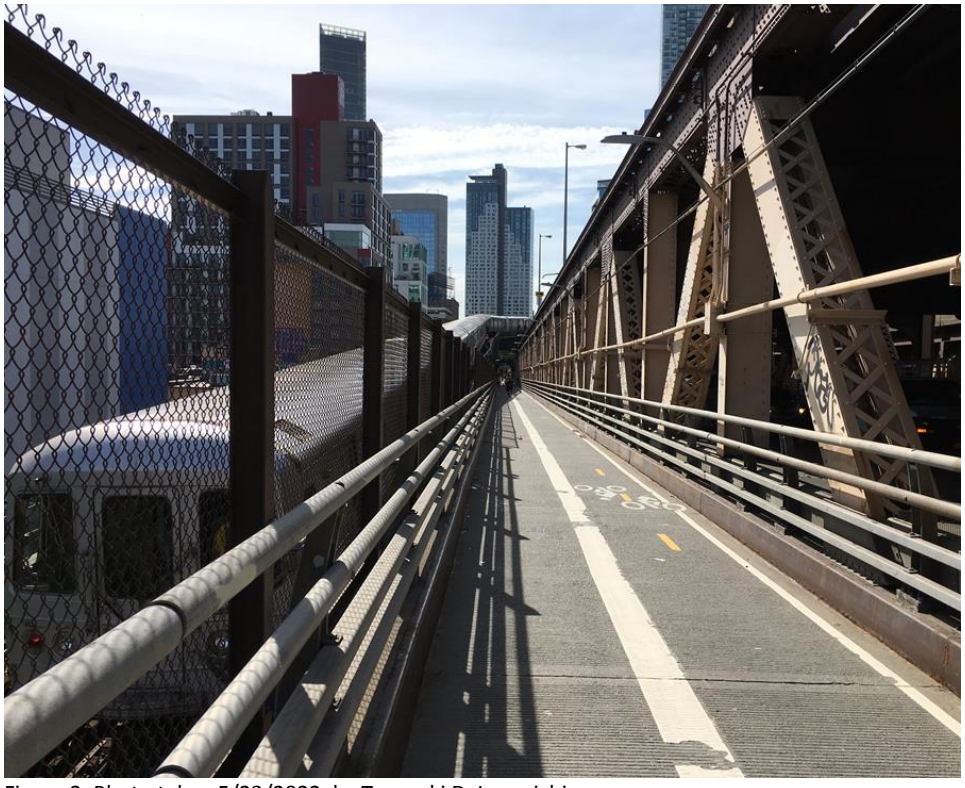

Figure 2. Photo taken 5/23/2022 by Tomoaki D. Imamichi

And yet, Bicycles can be very quiet and fast, at times faster than automobile traffic. With e-bikes, many cyclists have become even faster, particularly going uphill. On the Queensboro Bridge, it can be tricky as bicycles almost share the pedestrian paths- a narrow pathway just divided by a white line that is supposed to separate the wheeled from the shoes with a small margin of error. This hardly accounts for two-way traffic, and the need to pass within one's designated lane. Also, despite their majestic visual presence, passing quietly by the Queensboro Bridge are the Roosevelt Island Tramway suspended on cables and below large boats on the East River. They probably could be heard, if it were not for all the other sounds drowning them out. One can certainly imagine their sounds.

On the Queens side as the bridge descends into the neighborhood the subway emerges from the underground, from the tunnel and ascends to elevated tracks that are reflected in the changing sound qualities of the passing trains, next to the pedestrian path separated by a meshed fence to protect the trains from those weary of life (See Image 1). There is constantly clattering in the wind- like 16th note on a hi-hat- two cymbals mounted on a metal stand that fill the moments of the in-betweens of train traffic.

In Manhattan the subway rumbling comes from below, but once in Queens the subway rumbling comes from above, the rhythmic thumping caused by the gaps in the tracks are overlaid with screeching sounds (rail squeal) caused by the curves and friction as trains round the corners converging into Queensboro Plaza. Ah, the sounds of Queens (Sound sample: Rail Squeal: https://youtu.be/dXMULIwKiGY). Courtesy of aging iron structures of century old elevated tracks echoing amidst the newly constructed gentrifying high-rises with walls of glass windows not only acting as mirrors, but also as sound reflectors. It also appears as if the sound is trapped underneath the elevated tracks and between the high-rise buildings. They let me know where I am. The image of the city (Lynch, 1960), not as a visual map, but as a sound map. I remember the first few times how deafening the sounds seemed, and how gradually it seemed less so. No, it was probably not a loss of hearing, but habituation, and when one expects deafening sounds, they will seem less loud. I feel as if I can hear these sounds more clearly now, as I feel more attentive, more fine tuned, perhaps even more cultured (*gebildet*).

Differentiated Sounds

The percussion recital comes back to life on my walks through the city. Music pieces such as *Footsteps* by Benning (not in the live stream studio concert mentioned earlier) and *Le Train* by Augostini easily lead to the association of walking through the city. The Greek concept of mimesis (c.f. Aristotle), where nature inspires, art applies. Where classic composers such as Beethoven in his 6th symphony *Pastorale* have drawn inspiration from the countryside and sounds of nature, contemporary ones are turning to their everyday environments that tend to be primarily urban. An obvious example is the music genre of Techno that has taken inspiration from the sounds of industrial society (technology as in machines and computers) and turned them into music. What appears to be chaos and randomness can be seen, with a little imagination gained from the percussion performance, as order and patterns.

Cassirer (1944) notes the similarities between the arts and the sciences that they both try to see order and patterns in the seeming chaos and randomness. They may also pay attention to details that are easy to overlook and ignore.

When one chooses to listen, it can instill a sense of wonder of where various fragments of sounds are coming from and how they are produced, and how a composer would replicate these sounds and rhythms and perfect them into a musical piece. One may also think of a transformation of the same stimuli from noise (*Krach*) to sound (*Klang*), from cacophony to harmony. The German word *Krach* loosely translates as noise with a more negative connotation associated with loud harsh sounds. *Geräusch* can translate into noise or sound, whereas *Klang* loosely translates as sound with a more positive connotation associated with pleasant musical sounds.

Most of the urban sounds may be associated with “noise,” in fact most of the sounds are unintentional, a side effect produced by the various movements and constructions. Then there are a few intentional sounds, such as the honking and sirens, but they are not necessarily designed to be pleasant, as they are meant to catch the attention, which can be achieved by annoying sounds. And then there are a few intentional sounds that come from speakers with announcements and music that can be just as annoying. And yet, there is a potential for some of these sounds to be redeemed.

Beauty in the Ear of the Beholder

When thinking of Schafer's (1977) *Tuning of the World*, from an architectural or engineering perspective, this would not qualify as good acoustic design- it is too loud, and too many sounds are competing with each other in terms of timing and sound frequency. Most of the sounds seem accidental or unintentional- they are merely a byproduct of various activities, spatial occurrences, the meeting of materials, movement. And yet there are ways to find delight in any soundscape (so bad, it's good). Even when one may not be able to change the environment itself, but one can change one's way of being in it- the way one listens to it. Taking delight in the unintended acoustic design around Queensboro Plaza may be the privilege of the passerby, who only has to endure a temporary exposure, which would be different for one who has to work or live in these circumstances. And yet, if the city ever decided to renovate its subways and managed to do so, one might miss the old-school sounds of modernity. The sounds of inefficiency would vanish should the city put the subway underground and/or modernize the tracks and the trains.

Thoughts of sounds inspired by Benning's recital and by the walk through Manhattan and Queens, make me think of other places and situations: I must say that the Tokyo Metro's superiority is very much reflected in its soundtrack as well. It is much quieter, and smoother. There is less friction, less forced and wasted energy.

The same applies to runners- good runners seem to have less of a sound signature, one can hardly hear them, there is no stomping or scraping sound when feet smoothly land on, roll on, and take off the ground. Less strain on the body, less wear and tear on the shoes, it is efficiency that allows those runners to reach a fast pace and cover long distances. And yet, I fondly remember the stomping sounds of my running partner that would let me know his presence, which did not explain his ability to keep a decent pace, but perhaps explained his injury proneness.

Songs of Garbage

Beauty is in the ear of the beholder. Sounds can be profound spatial markers where I found myself surprisingly moved by, sounds that previously have escaped my attention, I have taken for granted, or considered a nuisance.

I recall a recent trip to my hometown and hearing the rhythmic crow of crows, the unofficial city bird of Tokyo, and the sound of garbage trucks- not all garbage trucks, and garbage sounds the same (they smell differently, too). Compared to North America, Japanese trucks are less intimidating, smaller in size and not as loud-thus death by garbage truck (c.f. Thompson, 2022) seems less likely. For cities such as New York that do some of the collection at night, such sounds may wake the newcomers, whereas to those who feel at home it may be a necessity to lull them to sleep. The ways of waste or resource managing systems come with their sound signature, and who would have thought that one may develop an attachment to them?

For me, these sounds turned to be treasures; sounds I was familiar with and that I grew up with. Sounds that let me know where I am, the sounds that make me feel at home… not merely that I am in Tokyo, but that I am on the 3rd floor of this particular relatively quiet apartment. It is the relative quietness that allows me to hear. There is much to the sounds- it is a combination and sequence of sounds- the "symphony" of the garbage truck with different "movements": the sound of the truck fading in from the distance, arrival, loading the contents (resource collection days with the clinking of glass bottles and clattering of metal cans are particular sound fests), compression, departure, the sound of the truck fading out in the distance. There is a particular distinctness to the sounds, and a particular pattern brings familiarity, and there are slight variations every time that bring novelty.

Finding the Rhythm

Moving beyond sound associated with warnings, diagnostics, and aesthetics, sound can be a facilitator of movement, particularly when associated with rhythm. Walking involves rhythmic movements that make rhythmic sounds (footsteps, breathing), and rhythmic sounds can facilitate walking as they allow one to settle into a pace.

Maintaining one's pace is important- one does not want to break one's rhythm, and perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of the city is the constant breaking of one's rhythm, whether it is traffic lights or other people, which is probably why so many cross on red, or venture into bicycle lane, all for the sake of keeping one's pace, maintaining one's rhythm- it is not so much the walking, it is the slowing down, the stop and go, that tire one out. That is the mystery of the rhythm, once one has settled into it, it seems one can go on forever. This corresponds to the

experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that is often associated with an activity where people settle into a rhythm, not too slow to invoke boredom, not too fast to cause stress. This applies to the distance runner and the raver- it is the right rhythm that keeps them going. There are several attractive qualities of long bridges that make them a desired destination for runners. One of them might be the views associated with them, another is the uninterrupted straight path that allows one to keep one's rhythm. At the same time there are ways in maintaining one's rhythm even within the context of traffic lights, particularly when crossing a grid-system of streets and avenues in a diagonal manner, the path and pace will be in part determined by the timing of the traffic lights that will encourage or discourage a particular crossing. One may eventually want to cross, but it may not have to be at that particular crossing, so one continues on to the next crossing in the hopes of better timing. One can also slightly adjust one's pace by looking and thinking ahead- a green light far in the distance on a long block will eventually turn red, a red light will eventually turn green, which may mean to slow down for a green light and speed up for a red light.

Finding the rhythm can be multifold. One is figuring out one's own rhythm, the other is figuring out the rhythm of the city, or the particular part of the city, and then figuring out how to synchronize with it. In that regard the same space may appear very differently in the eye and body of the beholder. For one it may look like chaos, the other may see order. Just as epitomized in the experiences of Grand Central Station in New York by Milgram (1970) referring to it as a "nightmare" of people bumping into one another whereas Hiss (1990) describing it as a choreographed dance with people "accelerating slightly, or decelerating, or making a little side step so that nobody ever collided."

In Lefebvre's (1992/2004) characteristics of rhythm one could think of arrhythmia, when a person is in conflict with the city's rhythm, and a eurhythmia if one has figured out the choreography. It is not merely observing of various people and objects and their movements, it is predicting them. One can imagine that everyone and everything comes with a soundtrack and a rhythm- some are just easier to see/hear than others.

Traffic lights have a predictable rhythm, about a minute on each indication (a command or a suggestion?), with the shorter crossings a 10 second-, and longer crossing a 20 second flash warning countdown before turning, which is particularly helpful in timing one's crossing. Traffic lights also provide an ebb and flow of sounds, as the lights turn

traffic stops and there is almost a moment of silence during the transition of having one light already red (no-longer-green) and the other still on red (not-yet-green). It is also that brief moment that some fast-footed people use for their last second crossing.

There are traffic lights that produce various ticking sounds that differentiate between the "Don't walk" and "Walk" signal. And there are traffic lights that talk, too. When on red it repeats "wait, wait, wait" until it turns to green to repeat "walk, walk, walk." In Japan, some traffic lights notice when you are crossing on red and tell you: "Danger- the traffic light is red!" an additional sound treat reinforcing crossing while red.

120 Beats per Minute

In terms of keeping one's rhythm, 120 appears to be the magic number. GarageBand is a digital audio workstation that comes with most laptops and smartphones these days. It has a default of a 4/4 time signature, with 120 beats per minute, a tempo well suited for most musical genres, which does not seem to be a coincidence: 120 steps per minute coincide with good walking speed and dancing speed, with every step coinciding with a quarter note. 4 beats will be in a measure, and 4 measures are one of the most common phrase lengths that complete a thought. It takes about 16 steps or 8 seconds. It also falls within range of the average sentence length.

The default setting for iMovie, the digital video workstation, is 4 seconds for a cut length, which makes timing a video with music easy. Based on the default settings for GarageBand and iMovie, the video easily synchronizes with the audio: One measure has the equivalent length of one cut.

120 words per minute is a good talking speed as well, not too fast and not too slow. A one-hour walk, such as the commute that inspired this article, appears to be the equivalent of a talk that contains about 4,800 words (a 40 minute talk and 20 minutes for Questions and Answers). 4,800 words is also the approximate length of a journal article, including this one (without references).

The Music Never Stops

There is an ever changing soundscape, partly because the sounds themselves change over the time- whether linearly throughout history or cyclically throughout the season, the week, or the day. Early mornings are quieter than late afternoons, and are marked by different sounds- there are few cars, but the few cars that are there tend to travel faster. Additionally, the sounds themselves are moving- when they come from a moving vehicle, but also because I am moving as well, moving towards or away from sounds, depending on my heading and as I turn a corner. As I turn a corner that shield the sounds, I am faced with sudden quietness- no, not quite, I can hear my quiet footsteps in an allegro (walking) rhythm, about 120 steps (beats) per minute, and one breathing cycle marks four footsteps, four quarter notes (the measure of a 4/4 time signature). Upon entering a building and passing through the double doors the quiet footsteps transform into a high pitched squeak that probably could be noted as a score as Schafer (1977) did with a wide sampling of everyday sounds. The rubber soles of tired worn out sneakers echoing throughout the halls of a cheaply tiled floor: The music never stops when being-with-ears.

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