

Contribution to the Round Table

Fear, sound, society – Scenarios for a musical history of evolution

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Will it ever be possible to reconstruct the sound of the world in which our ancestors lived? A world and a soundscape which seems impossible to compare to ours. To try to hear it we must all make a great effort and have a great imagination.

We must operate an acoustic 'time machine' that erases the sound of devices like headphones, earphones or speakers; of telephones and of any other tool used for the diffusion of sounds, both private and public.

We must erase the universe of household, metropolitan and industrial noises that we are now used to: from the smallest sound device to the large factory.

We must stop - and this seems to be truly impossible - the noise of firearms.

What remains it could correspond to the listening conditions of our ancestors.

Was theirs a hi-fi or low-fi soundscape?

A soundscape is defined as hi-fi when it is possible to identify and distinguish every single source of sound. What no longer happens in our metropolitan soundscapes.

The soundscape was certainly hi-fi to the ears of our ancestors: because they had to listen extremely carefully, to survive.

We have recordings, obviously made today, from regions that are considered "silent", that is, still far from human intervention. These recordings are the result of the work of an Italian researcher, David Monacchi, for his project "Fragments of extinction". He documented these sounds before the Anthropocene eliminates them completely.

I propose 2 listening sessions:

- Dawn in the Congo basin
- Dusk - amphibians, insects and birds in the Yasuni National Park (Ecuador)

In this primordial soundscape, **how** could the human's voice stand out, communicate her or his presence to their fellows, warn them?

With the use of the voice, modulated, rhythmic, according to shared codes. **Then**, with the first objects capable of emitting sounds, which were also shared.

Shared is the key word, it means that music was not, neither then nor ever, disconnected from the social context.

Genetic and environmental factors are not independent. In the development of music (a typically human activity, which has no significant manifestations in other animal species) they influence each other mutually.

How could the need for music develop in small, non-sedentary, nomadic human groups? What purpose could music have served the first Homo sapiens, 300 thousand years ago?

Our ancestors shared, like every human group, many moments of their daily lives. They certainly also shared fear, the fear of being few and not strong enough to defend themselves.

What is the reason behind the birth of a sound created by humans?

Was it a sound, a shout, a signal to communicate the presence, a position, a state of mind?

Music is a human invention, as is the ability to light and control fire: it is something we invented and which has transformed our lives. But it is not an art built on abstract principles disconnected from the social

context, it always takes on a multiplicity of meanings and exists through social and environmental mediations.

Have humans been shaped by evolution to be musical, or have musical abilities not been a target of natural selection **but instead** reflect our adaptive cognitive abilities?

The ability to create a language and give meaning to the sounds emitted by our mouth exists in every culture. The ability to recognize a certain musical rhythm and beat the beat following that rhythm is also present in all cultures. Were music and language born together?

Steven Brown, Michael Martinez, Lawrence Parsons in "Music and language side by side in the brain: a PET study of the generation of melodies and sentences" have outlined a comparative model of the shared characteristics of the neural systems that support music and language. The model assumes that music and language exhibit parallel combinatorial generativity for complex sound structures (phonology) but distinctly different information contents (semantics).

Music is a form of language: in every musical civilisation and in every language, sounds and words have found a way to interact and coexist. Then music took on other functions, not just signaling, not just defense and immediate, useful communication. Its semantics have multiplied, its meanings have exploded.

It has taken on a religious meaning (there is no religion that does not have its own music), magical, apotropaic, political, demonstrative, emotional, aesthetic, thus confirming that music is not a system of rules closed in itself, it is above all a communication tool that meets and interacts with different interpretative contexts.

Our ancestors, at the beginning of the evolution of Homo sapiens, quickly became aware of this power of sound; what we don't know is when they started getting pleasure from music.

I would like to conclude by returning to those sounds of nature, adding a thought from Roland Barthes: "*Nature, with its noises, is fervent with meaning; At least that's how, according to Hegel, the ancient Greeks listened to it. The oaks of Dodona expressed prophecies with the rustling of their leaves.*"

Dodona was a Greek city, in Epirus. In Dodona there was an oracle dedicated to two divinities: Zeus, king of Olympus, and the Mother Goddess, identified with Dione. It was the oldest oracle in all of Greece, perhaps dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. The cult involved interpretation by the rustling of the leaves of the tree sacred to Zeus, the oak. Birds had a central role in the oracle, as they were intermediaries between the world of the living and divinity.

The first instruments, made from animal bones, had high-pitched sounds, perhaps with the intention of imitating the singing of birds, the highest "voice", which stood out above all the "voices" of the world that we are dealing with today.

The voice that could be best understood. The first sounds produced by humans wanted to compete with the sounds emitted by birds, which fly overhead, intermediaries between our world and (the) divinity. In Richard Wagner's Siegfried, it is the voice of a bird that shows the way to the protagonist, who is about to get lost.

In the songs of birds, or rather in the infinite songs of the infinite species of birds that he listened to and recorded in the world, **Olivier Messiaen** sought that perpetual, timeless truth that he felt was excluded from the music created by humans, so deeply linked to historical time and its mutations.

What is certain **is that today** we no longer pay attention to the rustling of the leaves of the Dodona oak.

The **last listening** I propose comes from Borneo:

Dusk in Ulu Temburong National Park (Brunei, Borneo)

These sounds are still, indifferent, untouched by the time of humans, who today believe they are masters of nature.