

Kleefeld-Klangfeld

Shared Listeners: Exploring aurality, locality, and the sense of community through listening and sounding

Reflections about the Kleefeld-Klangfeld project activities from 2022-2023

Jan Schacher, October–December 2023

As the first engagement cycle of the project Kleefeld-Klangfeld, I had the privilege to carry out an exploration of the project's topics across the academic year 2022-2023. This exploration took place in encounters with a group of 80 pupils from 3rd and 4th grade, aged between eight and ten years old.

In five working phases between September 2022 and June 2023, I guided an exploration that was trying to understand world- and sense-making through listening with methods activating listening across several domains.

The main interest and drive were to have the youngsters directly engage through listening with their environment. Although the situations were framed within a school-curriculum, what was remarkable was that the activities didn't need to be synchronised directly with matters taught at that level. On the contrary, the approaches for listening, and subsequent empowering through making sound seemed to fall quite clearly outside of the usual mode of teaching/learning.

The circumstances of the cycle of exploration were well established with the school's teachers and principal. However, given that the school year began in an entirely new complex of buildings that was barely ready for the beginning of the year, considerable friction had to be overcome to be able to have the participating youngsters present. The 80 children were divided into four classes, which also provided the group size for each work session. Working with 20 kids and receiving support from the teachers, as well as accompaniment from project leaders SV and DM (in one instance also RK, one of the future collaborating artists), each work session allowed for surprisingly personal exchanges and encounters with the kids. Their personalities, different cultural backgrounds and degrees of maturity provided a rich tapestry of voices, attitudes, ways of interacting and perceiving.

The overall guiding idea was that **listening and sounding** can serve as a method for world-making through sound. How to engage youngsters who have never been exposed to sound arts, experimental music approaches or a conscious connection with sound to their world, proved to be the core challenge of this work. Through a step-by-step exploration of different phases of listening encounter, across an entire year, with recurring workshop-like approaches and concrete activities, the participants were exposed, guided, stimulated, and encouraged to listen and produce sound in the least judgemental way possible.

September 2022

The first encounter was spent on an exercise in sensibilisation by listening to their immediate environment, be it the courtyard of the school or the inside space itself. Already unusual for them, having to spend 5-10 minutes paying attention in silence to the sounds of their immediate environment proved to be their first challenge. Of course, at that age, somewhere between childhood and adolescence, the energy and impulses to move and act and the capability to remain concentrated are inversely proportional. But this is also a matter of habituation, an effect that could subsequently be observed in the widely spaced work-sessions across the year: slowly, through different ways of engaging, most of them acquired the ability to listen in a more concentrated fashion. The next challenge then became the task of articulating what kind of sound they heard, something which is not a given, by any means, even in adults. In the case of the multicultural mix prevalent in this socially diverse environment, language became an underlying question, not because it would be actively preventing communication, but because the level of comfort was widely different, reaching all the way to a newly arrived Ukrainian refugee without any language to share at first.

October 2022

In the second encounter a month later, listening was the focus of a more structured activity: each class was divided into three smaller groups with 4 to 6 youngsters and an accompanying adult. Each group carried three recording devices with headphones, which were shared in turn. Then each group went on a walk around the school's neighbourhood. Beginning either with an adjacent small forest, then walking down a larger suburban road along a tramline, and a tram stop before returning to the school, or the other way around, a variety of sonic environments were encountered and recorded. Of course, the listening through headphones with a handheld microphone proved fascinating in itself, as well as the fascination to be recording each other rather than the environment. With a non-dogmatic and non-judgemental approach that was essential, the recorded material proved to be as much about the social situations of each group as about the sounds encountered in the environment. With a quick turnaround, for each group, some of the recordings were then listened back to in the music room, again asking for impressions, and particularly a verbal articulation of what they had heard. The collected recordings would then become the raw material for the creation of short pieces by the groups.

February 2023

In the winter session, being indoors, the kids were introduced to simple sound-editing tools on desktop computer and tablets. (One class did both the soundwalk and the editing session within the same week in February, resulting in different experiences.) Each group that had been together on the sound walks was reunited and a library of sound-snippets provided to them. They were tasked to listen and select their favourite fragments and make an assembly or collage. The instructions were minimal, so as not to bias them into a specific direction. They were shown how to align, sequence, overlap and in some cases also cross-fade between the snippets, to produce a sonic piece. A metaphor used to instruct them was to 'make a radio piece/podcast, and construct a story told through sound-fragments, telling about the sonic characteristics of the neighbourhood. In a sharing moment, each group then played their piece to the class of 20, talking about

their story. Unsurprisingly, in the recordings of the soundwalk, the main elements present almost continuously were the kids' own voices. And as is typical at that age, they were fascinated by hearing their own talking, jokes, foolish play, etc. The task of going out and recording the environment thus resulted in becoming more of a documentation of their joint excursion, of how they were sharing the discovery of the recording device and listening through headphones, rather than the mere sound events of their environment. Nevertheless, the short pieces the pupils assembled managed to convey narrative elements as well as sonic characteristics of the neighbourhood. When asked to tell their story, they managed to fictionalise the fragments into imaginary events, sometimes obviously pulled from modes of storytelling in popular entertainment such as crime series. (cf. sound pieces on website: from Boesch_01.mp3 to Ragonesi_05.mp3).

May 2023

In the penultimate session in spring 2023, with the weather allowing outdoor activities again, two additional modes of engagement were explored. The first was an exploration of the architectural surroundings of the school, by means of listening – this strand was carried out by SV and will be described elsewhere. The second strand consisted of activating the kids to perform in a group setting. To provide simple, yet rich combinations of sonic and movement possibilities, a card game was introduced. Again, the students were divided into their respective groups. They were asked to pull one card of each type: kind, time, space. The task was to perform a sound and a movement sequence in their group. Without any instruments at hand, the sounds were obviously limited to voice and body sounds, such as humming, speaking words, clapping stamping the feet etc. the movements were carried out standing in specific distributions in space, according to the cards. The sounds were sequenced according to the 'time' card, simultaneously: sequentially, in groups of two and two, in an impulse with a silence (rest). etc. As challenging as these mini-performances were to practice and learn, and as strange it must have been for the pupils to learn and memorise these unusual performance-art actions, the outcomes led to laughter, bluster, fluster, and enjoyment. As a final step in the exploration, the performed actions were then shown together with the sonic montage pieces, creating a kind of mini theatre piece with a sound-track originating from their environment and their social interaction in sound.

June 2023

The final session of the year was synchronised with the school's year-end party. Being at the beginning of summer with hot weather, the party took place in the courtyard of the school. For this, the class-units and their sub-groups were one more time assembled in a rehearsal run out in the gravel surface. The mini-performance and the corresponding pieces were practiced with each class as their audience. At the school party, this situation changed: parents, other pupils, and all four classes were present during the party, making for a lively, loud and exciting moment on that sunny afternoon. In a kind of performance marathon, within 90 minutes, all 20 groups performed their small plays and played their sound piece, to the general applause of parents, classmates and teachers.

Issues and challenges in social sonic actions

A longer conversation will be necessary to investigate the achievements of this project strand. In a preliminary collection of thoughts, three elements stand out: cultural and institutional norms, individual sensibilities in social situations, (lack of) sonic awareness and ability to articulate.

The context of this project is clearly institutional by being embedded within a school, within the schedule and under the (loose) supervision of teachers. This enables us to engage a considerable number of pupils with the exploratory process. However, it also frames it in a pedagogical setting, imposing a hierarchy and social norms of behaviour that correspond to the school context. This limitation is intrinsic to the way the project this setup, financed and situated, which in itself is the basic condition for making it possible in the first place. The tension that arises from this has repercussions on the timespans that are given for the engagement. The model chosen in this first iteration was dependant of the time-table of the school, which generously offered teaching hours that otherwise would have been used in conventional pedagogy. However, the duration of engagement and the punctual moments spread across (for the kids, certainly) long periods of time, made creating a continuum complicated. An alternative approach should be explored, where longer timespans are dedicated to more regular encounters and work.

The question of behaviour in social contexts, in this case the schoolkids' class units, became very apparent. Aged between 8 and 10 years, the kids already present the stereotypical behaviour modes. Feminine and masculine behaviour stereotypes, but also cultural stereotypes and behaviour modes were sometimes very strongly influencing the group dynamic and the interactions, particularly between boys and girls, but also between kids with different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the attention spans and willingness to engage in unusual situations posed problems for some of the pupils. Managing these differences and tensions proved to be one of the more challenging aspects of the project. In this regard I am acutely aware of my own positionality, the type of person, authority, and power I represent. The kids' behaviour clearly reflected that back to me, and for this reason alone it was important to always lead the exploratory workshops in pairs, ideally with complementary personalities, approaches, and expressions. With a background in improvisatory, explorative performance, an attitude of open, non-deterministic sharing is my central approach. However, this is difficult to convey for several reasons: the social and institutional norms, but also the formatted behaviours patterns imprinted through schooling channel the kids into certain modes of interacting, for example transferring embarrassment to provocative fooleries. The individual sensibility displayed by these children is strong, beautiful, and inspiring from the adult perspective, but the social group context has a strong dampening effect on this, it stifles the expression of those qualities for the most sensitive and artistic ones. The age of the pupils in this project is quite particular: they are in a state between childhood and adolescence, already aware of the social status and importance of power, but at the same time still able to be in playful, imaginative, and spontaneous child-like states.

One of the realisations at the end of the process is that sonic awareness and the ability to articulate what we hear is severely underdeveloped. It is not that hearing would be poor or the willingness to listen when instructed is lacking. Rather, the focus in education on cognitive and intellectual tasks conveyed through

visual, textual, media-based channels, even in music education, undervalues or neglects the auditory focus, the ability to listen and consequently the ability to identify, memorise, give names to sonic dimensions of our environments, and therefore recognize the impact on the emotional states of how the sonic world around is organised. By that I do not only refer to problems of unmitigated sonic aggression in urban contexts, which might be one of the causes for desensitising and shielding in the auditory domain, and by extension the romantic notion that the only valuable sonic world resides in the ‘natural environment’ outside of heavily built urban settings. I also mean the devaluing of listening (and sounding) as an important dimension of social interaction in an everyday setting.

The kids in the project showed great enthusiasm, at times, to follow an exploratory process and to pay attention to their environment, their peers, the adults framing them and their inner voices. Imagination, curiosity, playfulness, and unfiltered emotion characterised their engagement, a gift that I appreciate and that keeps resonating within me.

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