

XABIER ERKIZIA

On the Trail of Hidden Sounds, Stephen Vitiello

"Most music pieces take sounds ready-made. A few generate their sounds through an encounter with chaos. whether before they start, as their pre-history; or else throughout their endangered progress, presenting the origination of some or all of their already heard sounds".

Jalal Toufic

In recent years, new technologies have taken on an extraordinary importance in nearly all areas of our life. We have reached a point that we might define as a fight between digitisation and naturalisation. We experience a struggle between completely accepting or rejecting tools which—like new arms, eyes or ears—are becoming an integral part of ourselves; in a contest between what we want to be and what we are.

It is not my intention here, however to "rage against the machine", or to shout the praises of radical naturalness; instead I want to concentrate on the relationship between these two poles within the field of art.

For a moment, let us analyse the influence the phenomenon has had on our sense of hearing, on our surroundings and, as a result, on our music.

In 1967, R. Murray Schaeffer began his pompously entitled book *The Tuning of the World* with a significant phrase:

"The soundscape of the world is changing". He was clearly talking about the "revolutions" of the new technologies we have heard so much about in recent times; he meant that human beings now live in a sound environment they have never known before. But Schafer's remark should also encourage us to take notice of the sounds around us and be aware of what they involve. In other words, it should encourage us to listen.

The purpose of this article is not to make an in-depth analysis of acoustic ecology. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the direct influence these features have had on the world of music and, above all, on the world of avant-garde music.

New technologies have made it simple for musicians to use and process sound infinitely, creating a tool that they could never previously have imagined. At the same time, this has broken down the limitations imposed by acoustic instruments (or perhaps it would be better to say classical education?) on the styles that had previously guided the relative hegemony of music, to create a broad international stage filled with many different trends and approaches. The result has been the emergence of a new generation that is unafraid of mixing styles, techniques, sound sources, locations, communications and ideas, and which fortunately (at least in principle), has looked more favourably on experimentation than the music industry has.

From the artistic point of view too, new media (advances in recording techniques, do-it-yourself editing and publishing, portable studios, etc.) have opened up new paths for developing Schafer's idea even further, insofar as it has offered the possibility of observing and working with not only audible sounds, but also microsounds.

In this search for hidden and often disappearing sounds, the work of American artist Stephen Vitiello is particularly noteworthy.

Vitiello's musical career has involved investigating sound sources, as well as the uses and processing of sounds. His compositions, combining analogue and acoustic

instruments with entirely electronic elements and field recordings, immerse the listener in deep soundscapes.

Vitiello, born in New York in 1964, first emerged as a guitarist and his work has always been grounded on music, but he is an artist of many different types, formats and media. His projects include music for videos, works for the Internet, sound installations, collection and documentation work, workshops and, of course, discs.

He has regularly worked with musicians, artists and choreographers of the calibre of Nam June Paik, Merce Cunningham, Scanner, Tony Oursler, John Cage, Jem Cohen, Pauline Oliveros, Rebecca Moore and John Jasperse.

"Listenable avant-garde music" New York Press

He released his first work in 1995, and with nearly a dozen discs behind him in the short space of time since then, he has become a leading name in international experimental music. Faithful to his origins, his work is based on permanent development, especially in the field of research into sound sources.

The beautiful *Bright and Dusty Things*, released by New Albion in 1999, is his most famous work, though sadly not entirely for musical reasons. It is also—it has to be said—his most perfect piece. It is the result of the sound installation constructed by Vitiello on the ninety-first floor of New York's *World Trade Center* in a residency that formed part of the *World Views* prize. Although its fame is partially due to subsequent events, the CD magnificently sums up his work and offers clear clues to its understanding.

The artist made a conscious effort to seek out the tenuous (and not so tenuous) sounds of the building at the time. By placing contact microphones on the windows of the floor and using a kind of oscillator built using photocells and a telescope, Vitiello wanted to capture the "hidden sounds" of the building and its immediate surroundings.

"In the case of the World Trade Center Residency, I found that the sounds already existed but were inaccessible—the sound of thunder, wind, airplanes, helicopters, the sway of the building, had all been expertly shut out by thick windows which would not open. It became my task to bring those sounds back into the room and in a sense, to bring it to life".

As anyone who has performed experiments of this type will know, intimacy is often an important sensation in the search for those tenuous sounds. Vitiello experienced this process of merging with the building in a special way; *"Most of the time, I would listen through headphones. It is strange to imagine an intimate experience with this building that had felt so oppressive, but sitting, alone, late at night I often felt I was connecting to the building in a way that no one else was".*

The contact microphones allowed the artist to reproduce the vibrations transmitted by the windows, while the photocells enabled him to convert all the types of light from the surrounding area into sound. Needless to say, these sources are practically impossible to predict; compared to an acoustic or electric instrument, they are uncontrollable.

And Vitiello has not only used this type of technique to locate and save sound sources: in his editing and studio work, he also looks for unpredictable results, or, to put it another way, improvisation.

However, this does not mean that his compositions shun direct rhythm or melody; he uses different improvisation methods, without limiting himself to pure compositional styles.

His work, then, comprises sound textures, microsounds and electronic, electric and acoustic interferences or experiments, slowly interiorising and creating compositions that are rich and beautiful in their sonority.

"The combinations of sounds are not dictated by logic, rather they are based on impression and pleasing combinations. The results may be experienced as abstract, but in my head as I created them each one had its own narrative and its own vocabulary".

Vitiello has worked alongside an extraordinary group of figures. One of the most important is Pauline Oliveros, a pioneer in the field of American electronics and an accomplished accordionist.

Others include Andrew Deutsch, Yasunao Tone, Tetsu Inoue, Rebecca Moore, Frances-Marie Uitti, Joan Jeanrenaud and the English electronic musician, Scanner.

Vitiello's work is also closely related to video. As he himself has often said, the link between video and music is so close that at times it is impossible to understand one without the other. Artists from the two fields have cooperated on important projects, and in many cases (going back to the subject of technology) video artists and musicians have teamed up.

Vitiello himself learnt under video artist Nam June Paik, and Bill Viola, one of the most important contemporary video artists on the international scene learnt under composer David Tudor.

In Vitiello's case it was the world of video that led him to publish his previously unknown work: his musical career began with a commission from artist Tony Oursler for one of his films. As he says himself: *"I didn't really become an interesting musician until I started working with visual artists and started looking for ways to parallel the ways artists were processing images".*

It might be fair to say that Vitiello, aware of the wealth and possibilities offered by the mixture between these two media of expression, has worked in a kind of duality, giving his works an identity that might be termed "twin-souled".

His sound works act like videos, to a certain extent creating "sound movies" of our surroundings (which are not always immediately visible), to the point where they turn sound into a visual experience. The video works in turn show us the importance of sound, which spectators, often without realising (perhaps by ignoring the obvious), often dismiss or relegate to the background. In other words, Vitiello, using techniques from the visual arts, turns sound into a multidimensional art form.

Among his image-related works, he has created music for independent films, for CD-ROMs and for experimental videos and a range of artistic installations.

His work for the Internet includes *Tetrasomia*, created especially on commission by the Dia Center. Throughout his career, Vitiello has built up collections of "unknown" sounds and he has painstakingly searched the Internet for everything from private collections to databases on insects, in search of non-musical sounds. Going back to Murray Schafer's remark on our constantly shifting and disappearing soundscape, he created an interactive *website* consisting of seventeen sounds grouped around the four elements—earth, air, water and fire—which included sounds of underground volcanoes and poison frogs. The site, which is still running (www.diacenter.org), also contains a piece composed by Stephen Vitiello using sounds corresponding to each element.

Vitiello's career has not, however, been limited to creation. As an art curator, for example, he has done important work for the Museum of Modern Art in New York and

for the Whitney Museum, and he directed the Sound Art component of the Whitney's important retrospective *The American Century. Art and Culture: 1950-2000*.

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Stephen Vitiello - Discography

- *Scanner/Stephen Vitiello*, collaboration with Scanner. Audiosphere/SubRosa, 2003
- *Autumn Light*, collaboration with Peer Bode and Andrew Deutsch. Institute For Electronic art. (Alfred University). 2003
- *Humming Bird Feeder ver.02*, Lucky Kitchen, 2002
- *Bright and Dusty Things*, New Albion Records, 2001
- *17:48 from the Texas Gallery*, Texas Gallery, 2001
- *Sounds Building in the Fading Light*, 10" vinyl, Creamgarden, 2001
- *Scratchy Marimba*, Sulfur U.S./Sulphur U.K., 2000
- *Bite the Neighbor*, 3" CD, iea, 2000
- *Fantastic Prayers*, CD ROM with Constance De Jong and Tony Oursler, 2000
- *Collaboration*, Dia Center for the Arts and Prop Foundation, 2000
- *Uitti/Vitiello*, 3" CD, collaboration with Frances-Marie Uitti. JDK Productions, 1999
- *The Light of Falling Cars*, JDK Productions, 1998
- *Chairs Not Stairs*, 1996
- *Enredando as Pessoas: Intriguing People*, EMVIDEO, 1995

Further information www.stephenvitiello.com