Sound Documentation and Representation: A Dialogue

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In the car, to and from Accettura in May 2005, we enjoyed a lively conversation about our procedure and aims with regard to sound documentation at Accettura. Some months later, with some of our original notes in hand, we sat down in front of a tape recorder to recall and reprise our initial conversations, and summarize the key issues as we worked on the recordings. This is an edited transcript of those dialogues, recorded on July 4 and 5, 2006 at Steve's studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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SF: Nicola, I want to begin by recalling your original proposition, to make a unique collaborative experiment in representation with two contrasting CDs, one concentrating on repertory documentation, the other on soundscape composition. How did this idea come to you and why is it important in the context of Italian musical research on festivals?

NS: There are several reasons. First, your presence in Italy to join our research team gives the opportunity to work from multiple perspectives. Second, ethnomusicologists usually focus on repertory documentation only, cutting the event into its different moments. But this is a limited approach, and here we have the opportunity to present the nature of the ritual more completely. Third, putting together the two approaches to acoustic documentation gives a much more precise sense of the form, complexity, and material of ritual. All together, in my opinion it is important that the documentary object matches the event studied and the perspective of study. So in the case of a long ritual over several days, we have an unfolding sound documentation from multiple ears.

SF: The value of repertory documentation is to produce very focused recordings of each kind of music, to show the diversity of styles, genres, and musical events. The contrasting value of a soundscape composition is a matter of critical listening. First one can open the dimension of time by recording continuously and while moving. Focusing both on music and ambient sound, one records from before the music starts until after it finishes, expanding the understanding of the context, recording from multiple spatial perspectives. In the more typical documentary approach one only starts as the music starts. While complementary to the repertory approach, this soundscape approach presents much more of the perspective of the particpating and mobile listener. Repertory documentation is typically only concerned with the best placement of the microphone for sound quality according to the specific kind of music. From the soundscape composition and listener perspective, the recording process and microphone placement is linked more to the overall experience of the event, how one moves into it, through it, around it, out of it.

NS: Can you explain more how your recording apparatus is directly linked to the soundscape composition process.

SF: The apparatus is an extension of the body, and this is very true when using the DSM recording system invented by Leonard Lombardo.[1] The microphones are mobile and worn on the head. They record a directional and spatial surround sound from the place of the ears. To listen and move with these microphones directly connects the body's auditory position and perspective to passage, motion, and attention to the acoustic environment. This is not an artificially binaural system but a dynamic stereo one where the body becomes the recording instrument, particularly calibrated by small movements of the neck and head. My recordings are a sound memory of the bodily experience of listening to a place.

NS: Another question, about memory. For the soundscape composition CD you are now making a selection, doing a mental reconstruction of your first experience in Accettura, which of course is very different from mine or other spectators. Which kind of mental operations are you doing when you select recordings and put them together? Going back to the question of memory it seems important that you are also making a montage and constructing a musical object. The result is something more a balance between memory and composition, where you concentrate not so much on documentation, but on the complete listening experience.

SF: Exactly. In my approach to soundscape composition two things come together. The first is the importance of the initial auditory impression, of a first acoustic encounter. The second is experience of editing as a kind of research into the recorded sonic material and its possibilities for composition. Editing is important in composition; like writing you have to select, to arrange, to layer, to create, to juxtapose, to shape a concept. Of course I am also selecting and composing while recording too, making many choices. But the more formal editing concentrates on multiple sonic juxtapositions in time and space. Both aspects of the work combine analysis with research. Some editing techniques focus on transparency of the narrative flow. Others extend and compress space and time and are meant to reveal themselves in the process. To join the processes of recording and of editing is to balance first impression and memory, to recreate something of surprise, to create a sound object that reveals its own construction. So the final recording is meant as both analysis and research, something the listener experiences as a synthesis, a cinema for the ears.

To explain my metaphor: I have transposed to sound from cinema some of the concepts that I was taught by Jean Rouch. [2] Rouch always argued that the camera operator was the first spectator, at the moment of filming, looking into the camera. And he argued that it is important to work with a special kind of second spectator who was not there at the scene of the filming. So I typically record by myself and then work in a studio with an engineer after I have done my own preliminary assemblage. The studio engineer is hearing things for the first time, does not know what I know about the visual and physical context and is not primarily interested in research or analysis, but simply interested in sound from the most critical technical angle.

NS: Concerning this approach to montage, two words I like very much are analysis and research. But there are different meanings to the words to explore as well. Analysis implies a tool to reach different understandings. The soundscape composition can be both an analysis of the ritual and it is also a final synthesis of the ritual, a description, all things put together. Sound recordings can grasp what is happening in the ritual in a unique way. For

example at Accettura there is an important issue marked by the passage of sound and music. When music changes, things change. This is why I am critical of some other research about Accettura that involves a misunderstanding of the value of music and sound. That research is focused principally on the visual aspects of the ritual; on trees and people only. The case of Rotonda is certain: there can be a possibility for serious accident. With a strong military organization, regimented, and no sound, silence, the rigor doesn't help the control. Accettura may seem chaotic, but the sound helps to create order. For example, at the *cima*, drunk boys dance with the *bassa musica*, and stay away from people cutting the trees. So for me the idea to focus on the regime of sounds, and specifically on the progression of musical events, is an important way to understand the very order of this festival. It makes clear that to analyze the spacial organization and the temporal progression of the music is to analyze the ritual. And I agree about research taking place not just at the moment of recording but throughout the process in the studio. The editing in the studio is a second moment of the research, and in this way the process is very close to the composition of electro-acoustic music.

SF: I think there are three moments of the studio process that join soundscape composition to electro-acoustic music. First there is new encounter. Playing back for oneself for the first time, and making mental notes while listening is a way of coming back into the original experience. Then there is assemblage. The selection that comes from repeated listening is an immersion into the key elements in the total material of sound. The third moment is the studio montage. This, of course, is closest to electro-acoustic composition in its focus on the manipulations of space and time, and creation of a total sound field.

I also think it is important to remember that engaged listening is a kind of research. And also to state that recording and playback is a kind of research into the conditions of hearing. Likewise, assemblage is again a kind of research into the condition of memory organization. And studio montage is a kind of research into compositional sound space/time, in a four ears and four hands dialogue with an engineer. So the three parts of the process, recording/playback, assemblage, and montage, combine as research, analysis, and synthesis.

Like you these are familiar concepts to me because I also had some early formation in electro-acoustic composition. Perhaps that is why some of my recordings in Papua New Guinea are criticized by ethnomusicologists.[3] This is an example to me of the fetish, and spectre, of "authenticity."

But to cite an instance from the Accetturta recordings, take the sounds of tuning the *zampogna* before playing. In the flow of the events one regularly hears this tuning process along with the playing of pieces, and it was natural for me to include this in my recordings. But think of how many representations of *zampogna* performance include no sounds of tuning, the recordist likely thinking this is "not important," not a "real" or "authentic" part of the music. To understand a sound environment, or an instrument, or a performance, or the interaction of players, or all of these, isn't it sometimes completely critical to hear the tuning?

NS: This is a very interesting debate about tuning and performance. With *zampogna* of course the player and the ethnomusicologist can have a very different perspective. For the

players, tuning is funny; you spend a lot of time tuning and testing with friends, so yes it is important to stress that the performance of “a song” is just one aspect of playing. And concerning the “authenticity” of the document, yes, this is a good point, and the problem for us really is derived from the typical perspective of musicology. In musicology the concept of a text is dominant, and it is conceived as a fixed and closed entity. Soundscape documentation goes far beyond this more limited view that reduces a recorded performance to a text.

SF: I agree that soundscape recording is a good way to make an argument against the notion of a primary or “authentic” musical text. In the case of ritual we don’t have so much a text but an unfolding experience of participation and community sentiment and action. When we listen to a ritual we can experience how time is highly concentrated and focused, but also how time opens up and closes down. What is most important in the Accettura soundscape composition is not to establish a singular “authentic” sonic text of musical objects, but to allow the listener to experience the shifting and enveloping sense of space and time that is the unfolding character of ritual.

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SF: Something that intrigues me is the way this project allows us to see you in the dual roles of both a researcher and a participant. You had been to Accettura several times before May 2005, you had the idea to organize a research team to document in pictures, sounds, and text the organization of the festival, and you took responsibility for the overall research and relation of the research team to the community. But your role as chief of the research tribe was disrupted almost instantly when we arrived! Your local friends wanted you to immediately play *zampogna* and participate as a musician, and you could not refuse. From one point of view, of course, research and participation are entirely complementary. But from another point of view they are in contrast. How you feel about the two sides? Did you feel conflicted? Did you think that being asked to play was distracting you from directing the research? Or did you think that your participation made directing the research more clear?

NS: It is not easy to talk about this, and it is the first time for me to think about it, especially regarding the project in Accettura. In advance of our arrival I knew that I was expected to play only for one moment, during the procession, that was agreed in advance. The idea came from the priest, to have a procession for workers and local people, accompanied by *zampogna*. So I thought, OK, I will stop with research for those few hours and play for the procession. But as we arrived, friends handed me a *zampogna*, and everything changed. On our way there my idea was to work with you, to use the DSM microphone, to benefit from your presence there and work together on the sound. I thought that my role as a player of *zampogna* would be more limited. But I have had a long history with the people there, going there for different festivals, and they know me as a player. In general I can add that often my playing *zampogna* is a preliminary way to be in touch with the local musicians, a way to establish a feeling of rapport with musicians. When you share something with other players like that the *zampogna* is an important way to explore things about the music and the feeling of the event. So I am comfortable with playing *zampogna* to establish an emotional feeling, and after that to do research better because of the musical rapport. But sometimes, like on the Monday in Accettura, there was an

embarrassing moment, when I was trying to concentrate on research but the people demanded that I play.

SF: I'm familiar with the idea of playing together with others as a form of rapport in fieldwork. But what you are raising strikes me as qualitatively different. I think you are talking more about a deep connection, where a certain authority comes locally from your musical role.

NS: Before being a researcher I am a deep listener. Take, for example, the Festival of Madonna del Pollino, where I am very involved.[4] Yes, I am called "the professor," but the local people don't know that I am an ethnomusicologist. They call me by that name because I play and know their music so well. In the past I have also experienced some problems around this issue with professional colleagues. "Bimusicality" is not central to Italian scholarship in ethnomusicology, although this idea is important for many in the US.[5] But for me this is a natural part of my musical history. I studied *zampogna* and other traditional instruments before entering the conservatory. For me in Basilicata what I am often doing is really not exactly fieldwork, but more about enjoying and sharing musical emotions with other performers. This is quite different from my research experience in the Balkans,[6] where they know me only as a researcher. Even if I sang with Gramsh singers, I was not an insider, not a local performer. But participation was important; when I asked them to teach me like that things changed. I want to ask a comparative question about your experience in Papua New Guinea. In your book[7] you say you were introduced in the community as a "song man."

SF: Yes, the term "song man" is a literal English translation of the Kaluli expression, and my colleagues introduced me this way in advance of my arrival in order to prepare people for my presence. They wanted the local people to understand that I was coming to sing, to record, to study their songs. The "song man" idea led to an interactive method once I arrived; it was just a way of having musical dialogue. This was especially important in a situation where it takes a very long time to learn the language, and even then, the transfer of verbal information is often not so straightforward. Remember, I was studying poetics and song, not instrumental music, where the approach can be more direct. I had read different things about these issues in books about fieldwork and research methods. But in Bosavi I ended up inventing my own way of doing things, largely relying on extensive playback of recordings, and interactive singing with recordings and singers, along with poetic transcription and translation.

NS: What about emotional feeling, the emotional part of making music together and connecting to local feelings?

SF: Before I left Papua New Guinea the first time, in 1977, some young men asked me all the names of the places that I had to pass in my travels before I would see my family again. Five years later, when I returned to Bosavi, I found that the names of these places had made their way into local songs. People close to me cried for those songs, because hearing those names made them think of loosing my presence. So my biography was incorporated into the system of place memories that make Bosavi people cry for songs. The most important thing about remembering a person is remembering shared places. But nobody shared these faraway places in Australia or the USA with me, and just the sound of these distant place names was exotic. But that strangeness actually made them

more powerful, because they were so full of mystery; in the end the emotional connection was stronger.

NS: The word “connection” is a key word here, and takes me back to key words we discussed earlier when we talked about differences between soundscape composition and traditional fieldwork for repertory documentation, where you don’t need to be connected. What is really your experience, thinking about Accettura, your first time there, did you feel a kind of connection?

SF: In a place I don’t know, with people and language that I don’t know, the connection for me happens later, not so much in the moment of recording and being present, but in the listening, organization and construction that takes place in the editing later on. In Bosavi, when I did the *Voices of the Rainforest* CD, a lot of the assemblage was done in situ. I explained to people my idea about the arrangement of places, the times of the day, the progression of sounds and selections, and people really participated in the editing. I really did all the pre-editing in the field, through dialogue and extensive playback, during and after the local recordings and before my return to the US. For that CD the greater part of the fieldwork was not the recording sessions but the extensive playback. Of the books and articles and recordings I did in Bosavi my favorite thing is still *Voices of the Rainforest*. And that is because it was the highest level of interactive co-authoring that I did with the Bosavi people. It was more innovative and radical than anything else I did there in the twenty-five years of research. It really sets a high standard for me in terms of recording as “connection.”

NS: Of course *Sound and Sentiment* is important inside the academic field, where it is a required text. In academia you need to write a book in order to be a serious scholar, explaining things rationally about the research. But maybe in the future we can think about new ways to make ethnomusicological work more through recordings, websites, video, different media, and writings would not be the only important measure of scholarship.

SF: Yes, certainly I share that desire. But to return to Accettura and the connection, the point for me is really about the necessity of feedback and playback in the research process and to social memory. It would be a wonderful pleasure to go back to Accettura and listen back to the recordings. The same could be said about film and photographs. The feeling for me comes when I see the faces listening and looking. Language doesn’t matter so much at that point. The important thing is that people understand that you listened carefully the first time, edited carefully after, and respect them enough to bring your work back for their criticism and response.

NS: Yes, we should think about a second experience in Accettura, to go back in order to play and listen to the recordings together with the people who are in them. And in addition to connection and collaboration as key words, we should add stimulation. This reminds me of something that happened in 2002, when I decided to start studying music in Basilicata. We had a workshop with students in Stigliano [8]. Traditions had been lost there. We arrived as a group of young people, and we started to play in the streets, to stimulate especially the old singers, who have seen young people with the old instruments, camera, etc, This was the starting point of a new process, and this kind of “stimulation” brings me to another consideration: the role of the researcher in preserving or changing the ‘tradition’. My presence in Stigliano was not neutral. The same for your presence in Bosavi. We both

played active roles in stimulating musical life. I am not sure if it is politically correct, But your presence in the field is not neutral. I was laughting today when you called your friends in Ghana and said “Hi, this is Prof.”

SF: Let me explain. Respect for age, and use of nicknames are both important in Ghana, and my musician colleagues began calling me “Prof” from the day they met me. There is nothing I can do to get rid of that name! Whatever it says about respect for my position, we must remember that is also prestige for the African musicians I work with. “Prof” is a piece of information people can use; it means that they are working with a (white) man of recognition and position.

NS: But do you think your presence there is “stimulating”?

SF: Yes. In Ghana I am doing different projects; all of them acknowledge and honor local musical creativity and inventiveness. All of them are understood that way by local people, as ‘stimulating’ musical creativity and courage. In the case of Por Por I am recording music that has never been recorded before, a musical form that has existed for sixty years but has been unrecognized by musical authorities. And my other work relates to the Ghanaian jazz avant-garde, with Ni Noi Nortey, Ni Otoo Annan, and their band, Accra Trane Station. In both instances I am dealing with under-recognized music and musicians, and advocating for their creativity and historical significance through recording projects.[9] So “connection,” “collaboration,” and “stimulation” are all linked together here.

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SF: The first night in Accettura we were greeted and hosted by the mayor at a town meeting. We were researchers on display as a symbol of local pride and you were asked to speak to the public about the research mission. It was interesting to see the positive effect, a kind of validation with the coming of professors and students. But on the other hand, we could question or criticize it differently, asking if the researchers are a tool of the business of cultural tourism, there to produce a product that can be sold as a token of “culture.” Are the researchers using the people, and the people using the researchers to reach an equitable balance? Or is the ritual in someway diminished, made banal? How do you see these issues?

NS: I agree; these are interesting questions. The people of course were very proud to have the researchers there to document the ritual. This was especially true for the English immigrants coming back to visit for the event. To me it was a reciprocal situation. They hosted us and allowed us to go there, giving us access to anything we asked. From their perspective we of course are also part of the ‘promotion’ of the event. The priest Don Peppino is very proud of the traditions of the Materano. For him, like for many people in Accettura, it is important to have people around, to document and validate these unique events. Sometimes is may seem difficult to have a balance, especially with the presence of the church, which, for example, provided strong support for the CD book. In other cases, elsewhere in Southern Italy, I had problems with the priests, or with the cultural promoters, especially when they had commercial demands. But in Accettura, it is different. The expectation is not commercial; the desire is to have a document that brings respect and an international reputation. Maybe it also is an opportunity both for the local people and the

researchers, to correct a prior impression that the people of Accettura don't like at all, namely, that the San Guiliano Festival is just a *sauvage* ritual. Your impression?

SF: My impression is similar to yours. Compared to similar situations I have experienced in Europe or the US, there was very little pressure in Accettura, certainly no attempt to control or restrict us. Yes, funding was coming from the priest but this was without any demand to emphasize or focus on the the religious character of the festival.

NS: Yes, but this is really a special case.

SF: The main impression for me is not about a religious vs. public tension. It is the strong element of masculine collective work that is displayed in every aspect of the event. That came across to me both in visual and sonic terms.

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SF: Our project emphasizes sound but of course the presence of two photographers in the team is important too. Can you say somethingh about how you conceived the parallel visual dimension of representation, with two kinds of images, and the contrasting visual perspectives of Stefano Vaja and Lorenzo Ferrarini.

NS: It is really important to involve photographs and have diverse perspectives to put together with the sonic representations. Some moments might be more compelling from the visual perspective, other moments from the audio perspective, and some are equal. The best way to make a 'correct' presentation, that allows us to represent the experience of the ritual with a good balance, is to combine different perspectives together. In this case, deciding to focus on sound, I think that the best complement is the photo, and not the video. Stefano Vaja knows the festival well. It was his third time at Accettura, while for Lorenzo Ferrarini it was the first time. They work in different ways, and that is also important to the final presentation, the images well in balance with the different approaches of the two CDs. Stefano's images make a visual tale of the Festival, focusing of visual narration, and this will be very much like the approach you take to the soundscape. Our prior experience of *Santi, Animali e Suoni* [10] is helpful, as the two of you worked together before in a very complementary way, with an emphasis on aesthetic presentation, and the counterpoint between visual and sound. Lorenzo concentrated on specific moments, corresponding to the overall documentation, perhaps more like the second CD. Combining all of these layers we will give a very full representation, one that allows people who were not present there to really experience the ritual.

SF: I agree, and think that it is particularly stimulating to record sound side by side with photographers, because the recordist imagines the related images as they are being shot, and the photographer imagines the related perspective of the sonic sequences. This was a very natural experience for me, working alongside Stefano and Lorenzo, very much like the one of working alongside the photographer Dick Blau in Greece. [11] In both cases we were very all aware of both the independence and the interconnection of how we followed the action, how we positioned ourselves to hear and see with a deep sense of space and deep relation to time. To signal this, I always like to occasionally get very close to the photographer so that on my soundtrack you hear the "click" of the camera shutter. Making

clear my acoustic awareness of the camera is parallel to the way the photographer sometimes puts a piece of me recording into a photographic frame.