

*Stereophonica*, by Gascia Ouzounian, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2020, 211 pages

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## ACTUALITÉS

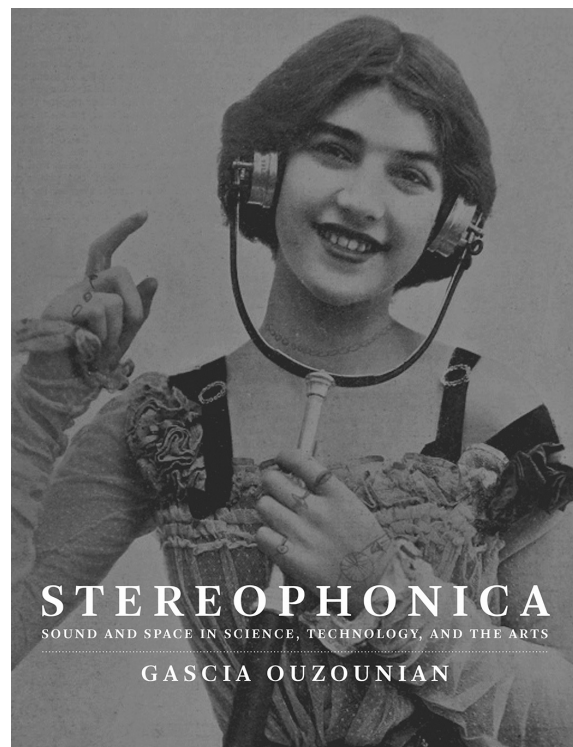
# *Stereophonica*, by Gascia Ouzounian

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James O'Callaghan

Listening is an act that helps us understand where we are. At its most basic level, it's a fundamental part of our biology. The rush of excitement we may feel from the surround sound in a movie theatre or an electronic music concert connects us to some of our most primal instincts. Early in our evolution, the ability to hear sound in space helped us navigate our environment and survive. Today, it is central to so many aspects of our lives that one might be surprised to learn that the mere idea that *sound is spatial* was not widely accepted or studied in the scientific community until the nineteenth century, as Gascia Ouzounian details in her compelling new book, *Stereophonica*. From this point of departure, when binaural audition (or 'hearing in stereo') becomes an object of scientific study, Ouzounian charts a course through the proliferation of interest in spatial sound in the twentieth century. The book recounts the development of military acoustic defence technologies and sonic warfare, medical and communications technologies, and the new art forms of electroacoustic music, spatial music, and sound art. From these historical accounts, she traces the growth of the new fields of acoustic ecology and urban sound studies.

While *Stereophonica* is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the vast topic of sound and space, it



presents a fascinating window into the relationship between the two, reflecting the plurality of meanings that 'space' can have in relation to sound. As she writes in her introduction, it can be "understood in physical, sensorial, geographical, social, and political terms." Ouzounian's own interdisciplinary background<sup>1</sup> allows her to weave through this network of interconnected fields with intrigue and colour. She writes with infectious enthusiasm, beginning from the

first chapter's absorbing accounts of early experiments in sound propagation, involving eclectic situations ranging from the firing of grenades as subjects listened underwater to a subject listening through a metal wire held in their teeth.

The book captures the often enchanting and mysterious qualities of spatial sound, animated by discussions of the *echo* and its role in mythology, spirituality, and aesthetics. Ouzounian's examination of the way that spatial sound has dazzled and beguiled the human imagination throughout history progresses naturally to its impact on art. *Stereophonica* looks more specifically at spatial audio in twentieth-century music and sound art, especially through the mid-century evolution and proliferation of electroacoustic music. As an electroacoustic composer and sound artist, I share in Ouzounian's fascination with the subject, which will also likely be of particular interest to readers of *Circuit*. While many practitioners and enthusiasts of these and related art forms are attracted to the liberating potential of spatial sound,<sup>2</sup> it is often presented in utopic terms: the 'magic' and abstraction of art is often sequestered from the reality of human society and the natural world. *Stereophonica* reminds us that they are deeply interlinked.

Ouzounian details this link through her discussion of the development of acoustic technology, ranging from stethoscopes to telephones to sound locators used to detect aircraft during the First World War. Beyond the technological and scientific advancements that these and other developments offered, the specialized forms of 'spatial ear training' that have emerged from them have dramatically influenced not only the ways we listen, but the ways that we conceptualize the act of listening itself. While we can trace a link between the pleasure of listening to music on headphones with the life-saving technology of the differential stethoscope, we can also see the way spatial audio has developed through and toward more nefarious applications.

Beyond the perhaps more evident horrors of warfare and surveillance, the negative impact of sound in space on our lives has become an increasing concern for many, and has contributed to the development of the growing fields of acoustic ecology and urban sound studies.

Blooming out of the budding environmental movement of the 1960s, acoustic ecology considers that sound in *space* also means sound in *place*. Hearing 'where we are' doesn't just help us get around in the world and avoid potential dangers, it also tells us a lot about our environment, in every sense of the word. Considering our sounding environment ecologically is a means to understand that sound dramatically impacts the lives of all living organisms. From the mating and migration patterns of animals who may no longer be able to hear each other as the result of (human) sonic activity to the impact on hearing loss and psychological discomfort that transportation technology can cause, life on earth can be imperiled by sound just as much as it can thrive through it.

Much of the early work in this new discipline arose from the World Soundscape Project, created in the 1960s at Simon Fraser University by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer.<sup>3</sup> For my own part, discovering this work during my studies there was a revelation—rather than considering musical sound as somehow "neutral" or "abstract," discovering the social and environmental dimensions of the genre of soundscape music inspired me to find me a means of artistic expression within a world that seemed otherwise inaccessible through its self-sequestering from the complications of reality. Today, more and more places of learning appreciate the importance of an interdisciplinary understanding of sound: music finds itself among newer disciplines like communications and sound studies. *Stereophonica*'s impressive and engaging cross-disciplinary span would make it a welcome addition as a course text in any of these fields.

The tone of the book takes a rather sharp turn in its final chapter, “Sonic Urbanism in Beirut.” The historical account Ouzounian offers leads us to contemporary challenges, and it is here that the book offers its most critical and personal perspectives. The special way that sound concentrates in cities (and all the perils this affords) has led to well intentioned but sometimes misguided attempts at *acoustic design* in urban contexts. In my own experience, I recall that one of the special privileges of studying at Simon Fraser was having access to the World Soundscape Project sound library, a huge catalogue of field recordings.<sup>4</sup> Among the more idiosyncratic categories in the library is ‘*design*’ (*usually bad*), complete with scare quotes and accompanying commentary. While one may easily scoff at attempts to ‘beautify’ city environments with recorded birdsong or background music (e.g. “Muzak”), urban sound design can result in more than simple annoyances of personal distaste. I would argue that here, as in all aspects of urban planning, the question “for *whom* is this designed?” is too infrequently asked. While noise ordinance efforts to address potential hearing loss in city contexts from conditions such as *Living Under the Flight Path*<sup>5</sup> may be relatively unambiguous, in my opinion, the idea of what constitutes *unwanted noise* is deeply nuanced, personal, and cultural. One need only think of the moral panic that emerged in the 1980s from the proliferation of portable sound systems: the familiar epithet of the “ghetto blaster” conveys the underlying cultural prejudice behind attempts to control the acoustic environment in cities. What constitutes “noise pollution” to some may be desired and celebrated by others,<sup>6</sup> and when only the powerful have the means to decide which sounds are acceptable and who can create them, we approach hegemony and cultural erasure. Even our perspective on what constitutes a “balanced” sonic ecosystem may reflect our own aesthetic priorities rather than the best interests of different kinds of life on the planet.<sup>7</sup>

The history of spatial sound that Ouzounian lays out through much of *Stereophonica* is largely Eurocentric, and reflects the kinds of listening and sound production valued in WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic).<sup>8</sup> Ouzounian challenges these perspectives through her discussion of sonic urbanism in Beirut. The efforts to rebuild the city after the devastating Lebanese Civil War, moulded by corporate interests and corruption, have resulted in radical urban transformations insensitive to local contexts and ecologies. *Stereophonica*’s last pages represent a fascinating case study in the ways sound artists have responded to these conditions in the city, with the reminder that “the art born of the city-in-perpetual-upheaval is not necessarily emancipatory or redemptive” (p. 154). These discussions are interwoven with beautifully written ‘essays *in situ*’ where Ouzounian shares her own personal, introspective responses to these sonic conditions.<sup>9</sup> I am struck by the way the topic of sound in space often returns to the personal: the way we listen to the world around us tells us who we are. Ouzounian’s remarkable book is a poignant reminder that who we are and how we listen may be very different. The more we allow ourselves to listen to unheard histories, the more we can imagine alternate futures.

1. Ouzounian is a Professor of Music at the University of Oxford and the co-director of *Recomposing the City*, an interdisciplinary research group engaging in urban sound studies and urban sonic practices. She is also a violinist and composer with a background in Music Technology and Critical Studies.

2. I certainly include myself in this!

3. Schafer sadly passed away on 14 August 2021, while this issue of *Circuit* was in production.

4. For decades, this substantial collection was only available on magnetic tape (and later DAT), but the library has now been digitized. Information about the collection, the World Soundscape Project in general, and how to request access can be found here: [www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/index.html](http://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/index.html) (accessed July 30, 2021).

5. The soundscape composer Hildegard Westerkamp created a beautiful sound documentary with this name in 1981. See [www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/sound/docs/flightpath](http://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/sound/docs/flightpath) (accessed September 20, 2021).

6. Schafer's own *Book of Noise* (1970) lists "Amplified Rock and Roll" as among the loudest (and therefore most threatening) sounds one may encounter in a city—right between "Pneumatic riveter" and "Jet plane," complete with a precise decibel figure. There's no question that listening to loud music can damage one's hearing, but it should be obvious that any genre of music can be made arbitrarily loud through amplification. Where sound intersects with culture, the distinction between what is menacing, welcomed, or even deeply valued becomes deeply personal.

7. For a very thoughtful critical engagement with some of the foundational assumptions of acoustic ecology, I recommend: Andra McCartney (2016), "Ethical Questions about Working with Soundscapes," *Organised Sound*, vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 160–65.

8. This term has become more and more common in contemporary psychology research to identify the systemic bias that often emerges in subject pools drawn from such cultural contexts. See: J. J. Arnett (2008), "The Neglected 95%: Why American Psychology Needs to Become Less American," *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, No. 7, pp. 602–14.

9. Ouzounian was born in Beirut and spent most of her formative years in Canada. These essays recount her experience as a "virtual newcomer" returning to the city.



Photographie tirée du vidéoclip de «Black Lake» (*Vulnicura*, 2015). Image: Andrew Thomas Huang.