

Sounds like
nothing



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By Simon Thorne





Here is a landscape where, if you use your eyes, the evidence of its transformation over time is not difficult to see. But what if you use your ears instead? If, instead of focussing on looking, you bring the same care and attention to your listening, then is it possible to hear those same continuities and disruptions? If I now assume a particular professional perspective, as an artist who deals in sound, then how is it possible to create any kind of connection between a prehistoric society, about whose aural culture we can say very little, and a marginal rural community in modern Europe? The sounding world occurs by virtue of our inclination. We hear what we are predisposed to listen to. As a composer what strategies of listening can I bring to bear that can make connections? The archaeology of artefacts is made possible by the endurance of objects. Because things tend to stay where I put them then if I am meticulous enough in my observation I can construct an entire worldview out of the rubbish that got left behind. If I listen carefully enough, can I say similar things about the sound world I find myself surrounded by?

The archaeology of aural culture is a matter for conjecture. It is perfectly plausible that the Neolithic people knew the sounds of flutes and drums. Going on the extant evidence of other forms of cultural expression it is impossible that they did not practice music. But to speculate what the music was is a matter of poetic interpretation that only serves to fuel our own romance with the archaic and the primitive. If music is a special case of human expression that occurs as a consequence of our sensitivity to sound, here it is too soon to ask what that music could be. By way of setting out the particular landscape that is in front

of me now, it is more appropriate to begin by asking how common auditory systems build a picture of the world around us and in what way an environment shapes its own sound world – in other words to notice how I am listening to the place where I am.



While sounds have duration, they do not in themselves endure. I listen to the wind rustling the leaves in the tree. I hear the herd of hooves trampling over dry grass. Even from a long way off I can hear the hammer and the blowtorch as the workers weld a new roof for the church. As the events unfold that bring them into being, so sounds arise and they disappear. Here, unless I adopt

a conscious mode of abstract listening (which we composers are trained to do), whereby I hear sounds as a throng of purely acoustical sensations, I am inclined to register the auditory events that make up the acoustical world as the sounds of things. Together they make up the sonority of a landscape at a moment in time. More than that, sounds give voice to the landscape. By virtue of sounds occurring when things do things to things (the axe splits wood, the rain pelts the roof of the church), what there is to hear is a portrait in sound of the life of an environment. Taken as a field of listening, the auditory landscape



occurs as an immersive environment that surrounds me. This is distinct from the visual field which can only ever be that which I see in front of me. Inside of this field some sounds occur as highly localised and specific - the sound of my own footfall as I amble along the dirt track. Others - like the aeroplane that pervades the audible spectrum long after the object itself has disappeared over the visible horizon - occupy a vast field of dispersal. Nevertheless, like the visual field, the auditory field has a boundary. Even the sound of the aeroplane will eventually disappear over the auditory horizon. The question is what lies beyond? The common answer is silence.

The auditory field that I find myself immersed in as I write is in a constant state of fluctuation at the limits of this horizon. This is for two reasons. Firstly, there is a certain threshold of audibility that a sound must cross for me to be able to register it. Here the question of distance is critical. As I am sitting in front of my computer screen the impedance hum that suddenly seems to have afflicted the left channel of my multimedia set-up is enough to obliterate the police siren that is screaming down the road outside. But if I wander into the kitchen to make a cup of tea then the perspective is entirely altered. The police siren is still



with me, but the impedance hum has completely disappeared. There is a new hum which is the sound of the fridge motor. It should be clear by now that the environmental auditory field, unlike the field of physical objects to which it is correlated, is inherently unstable. Nevertheless I am perfectly able to calibrate my perceptual framework to this. Even with my eyes shut, I am readily able to navigate according to the aural dimensions of the occurring world.

However the horizontal limits of the auditory field are also calibrated to the inclination of my listening. For all that there is to listen to, as I write this now, I hear none of it. In the circumstances of my thinking what to say that has any consequence, silence acquires the contours of there being nothing to hear. As I write so I actively seek this out. Otherwise I cannot hear myself think. It is a personal thing. Others don't. They need the distraction of noise to encourage the verbal flow. The cocktail party effect (Augoyard & Torgue 2006, 28) describes the human capacity to apply highly focussed listening attention to a narrow band of the auditory field by disregarding irrelevant information coming from the surroundings. In that it specifically refers to our apprehension of speech, we are perfectly able to conduct a conversation in an otherwise prohibitively noisy environment. But the tactic would seem to be more pervasive. Not only do we tend for the most part to disregard the



throng of acoustic sensations that make up our listening in favour of a direct causal correlation (as in *the sound of...*), we are highly effective at screening out unwanted noise, even to the extent that we heard nothing at all. What we hear serves to monitor the kind of listening intention that we bring to the world at any given moment. So is it the case that the sound of silence and the sound of nothing at all are one and the same thing?

A sound occurs as the irruption of an event. A sounding landscape is made up of a contrapuntal web of events that can be expressed as an evolving network of durations. To capture this is to record a map in time. Sounds arise, disappear, and are replaced. Certain sounds have a quality that endures. The babbling stream is ubiquitous. Other sounds become obsolete. In Europe at the onset of the twenty first century the sound of the horse and cart is already picturesque. According to this logic, the past is intrinsically silent. So too is the majority of any given environment at any given moment. The act of recording may serve as a tool of preservation. But it is important to recognise that already, from the outset, this occurs as an act of interpretation. Unlike the physical site report which, for the reasons outlined above, can lay claim to a certain objective neutrality, sound recording assumes a point of orientation which is a position of listening. While the site report refers to a terrain that enjoys a certain physical stability, the sound recording frames a moment in time that vanishes as soon as the recorder is switched off. In this respect, what got recorded is entirely arbitrary, indeterminate flow. But the replay button now allows access to a chunk of auditory history that can be repeated much

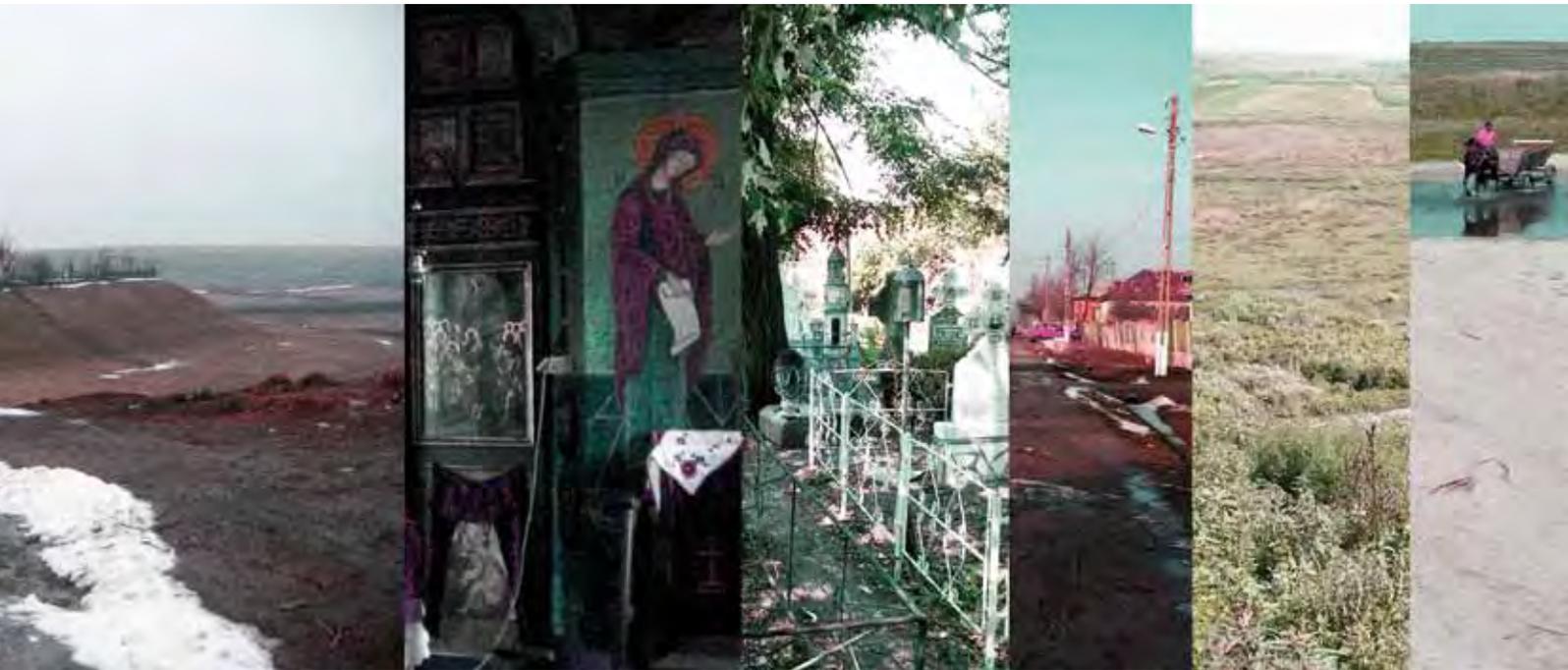
like any other musical composition. The sense of what got recorded emerges after repeated listenings, as our ears become attuned to the unfolding narrative of nothing in particular (Brian Eno speaks of this as a deliberate tactic of training in aesthetic perception, in Toop 1995, 129). Uncoupled from its visual location, what kind of sense can we make of the background noise of life carrying on?

This is a question of rhythms and speeds. Sounds have duration. The agglomeration of durations gives rise to rhythms inside of which it is possible to perceive repetitions, patterns, cycles and tempos. Rhythms acquire qualities, but only in relation to other rhythms. If I am willing to listen carefully then out of a chaotic, arrhythmic stream of background noise I can begin to distinguish and discriminate. The mechanism that allows for the perception of this is rooted in the function of memory. It is the stuff of music. But in the absence of any conventional musical material to attend to, what qualities does a musical listening to the sound of nothing in particular begin to reveal? What new knowledge is to be gained by considering the rhythms of everyday life as somehow musically expressive? Put differently, is it possible to discern a relationship between musical time and lived time?



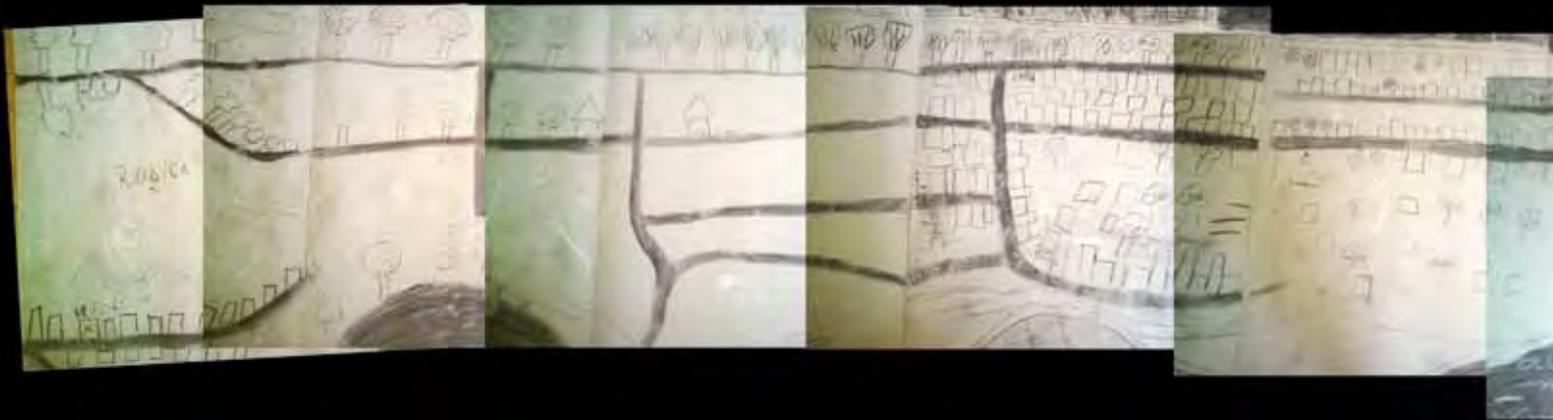
Lefebvre states:

Centuries were required for musical time to discern itself from verbal time; which is to say for musicians and music to give themselves proper and specific rhythms, distinct from spoken rhythms, gestures (and the written) (Lefebvre 2004, 61).



This presupposes a codified aesthetic domain that allows for music (along with all other art forms) as a special case. But one could equally paraphrase and invert Lefebvre's statement. There is a case to be made that millennia were required for verbal time to discern itself from musical time: which is to say for humankind to invent for itself the spoken rhythms, gestures and writing proper and specific to representation, and distinct from the inflections and measures of immediate physical expression. Here to talk of a musical landscape ceases to have anything to do with historical codes of aesthetic representation. It is to talk of the dimensions of sensuous perception as they are given in an immediate apprehension of sound. This creates the appropriate space for subsequent questions to emerge that relate specifically to aesthetic design. This is the starting point for my work as a composer that begins to engage with the lived continuity that is Măgura.

The outcome of residency in Măgura in July 2010 resulted in three projects. A sound map of Măgura was drawn in collaboration with the children of the village school. Another sound map was made from audio recordings of the landscape. Audio recordings were also made of specific silent spaces. So what got done?



Drawing Măgura: a sound map

What does it mean to make a map? What does a map record? What does a map not record? If you want to make a map of Măgura for the rest of the world to see then what do you want to show them? If you want to show them the trees, then how can you do this accurately? How can you show the trees in summer and the trees in winter? Can you create a map that records the passing of the seasons? If this is to be a map of sounds then how can you draw them? How do you represent the sound of a goose to a deaf person? What are its qualities? Where on the map should it be placed?

Looking at an already existing map of Măgura, two lines stand out. There is the dead straight line of the main street, and there are the tightly convoluted meandering curves of the Clanișsa river. These are visual continuities that can anchor a coherent collective effort. If maps tend to survey the landscape from above then it seems appropriate to be doing this drawing on the floor. We will negotiate the space accordingly. If what we produce through our teamwork is to be more than a photographic record then it becomes a





question of texture and of time. Charcoal and chalk are unstable media that demand an expressive approach to the drawing of lines. The instruction is to be meticulous. This is inherently impossible. What comes to be embedded in the map is the gestures of its authors. The outcome is a collective drawing – a composition that can equally be considered as a notation. Here the map has the potential to be read as a score. It remains to be discovered what kind of music could be made from it.

Recording Măgura: a sound map

If the process of drawing Măgura has the intention to create a geographical map of sounds, then the process of audio recording is with the intention of creating an equivalent geography in sound. In cinematic terms what got recorded is wild track atmosphere. But without the audio-visual coupling that turns this into the backdrop that lends authenticity of location to foregrounded narratives, what there is to listen to has the status of pure background. From this as yet undifferentiated perspective what is the nature of the sonic landscape that is distinctive? What are its particular rhythms and qualities? If this is to be considered as music, then what kind of music is it?



Recording was done by walking the landscape: a process of eavesdropping that was a deliberate tactic of peripheral listening on the edge of the scene. Sound walks repeated at different times of day produce different landscapes. Slowly the rhythms of the environment begin to reveal themselves. The rhythm of the goatherds bringing their flocks down to water has the regularity of clock time. The regularity of thunderstorms as they accumulate in the afternoon is a different meteorological time. On the days when there is no thunderstorm there is a seamless transformation between the calling of crickets and cicadas that signals the transition from afternoon into evening.

The rhythms have qualities but only in relation to other rhythms. So careful listening shows the landscape to have a particular tempo. The far side of the valley has a slowness that is measured out by the sporadic buzzing of insects and passing aeroplanes. At prescribed times the barking of dogs signals the wandering of flocks and herds that picks up speed as the flocks wander closer to water.



The river is a line of demarcation. Its sound is an endlessly unfolding continuity. Listening to the fluctuations of its density becomes a monitor of the state of the weather that has already been. It is a record of the past as it flows into the present. At the same time it is an attractor to all the flocks, herds and swarms that are teeming around it. Depending on the time of day there is much competition for what it offers.

The main street records a passage from the feral to the domestic. Human voices gain the upper hand, subduing (as in causing to be quiet) and containing the



roaming flow of animals and birds. At the same time the interplay of speeds is self-evident in the counterpoint of modes of transport. Momentarily the Doppler shift of passing cars masks and obliterates the sound of anything else. By contrast, the sound of a horse drawn cart retains a certain transparency. We are still able to listen to it, even before it passes over the auditory horizon at the brow of the hill.

Documenting silence: the resonance of empty spaces

Drawing and recording the aural environment of Măgura has to do with capturing the sounds of nothing in particular – the sounds of everyday life as they occur in a natural landscape. But what if I now turn my attention to interior spaces and record the sound of what is, to all intents and purposes, silence. To varying degrees, enclosed spaces display the property of resonance. This can be understood as a system of standing waves that give rise to a resonant frequency. The room has a characteristic frequency that becomes excited and starts to reverberate when another frequency, that is equal or almost equal to the characteristic frequency of the system, is introduced into the system. So by recording the room and subsequently playing the recording back into the room what is built up over time is a feedback process that is exactly calibrated to the dimensions of the system. The room begins to sing in its own voice.

Along the way, minute perturbations of the system (as for example the almost inaudible sound of the rustle of wind in the trees outside a church, or the subfrequency oscillations that are the barely perceptible residue of a thunderstorm) become recorded into the system. Subsequent recordings amplify the perturbations in a way that further destabilises the system. It is as if, left to its own devices, a room generates its own mute music. We can only listen in wonder in anticipation of what this will be.







A scientific experimental method involves a degree of manipulation of physical reality. By way of verifying a hypothesis, scientific experiment involves a staging of reality in such a way that it conforms as closely as possible to a theoretical description (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, 41). Aesthetic experiment is of a different order. John Cage describes the idea of an experimental music as “an act the outcome of which is unknown” (Cage 1955, 13). This is to advocate the case for an experimentalism that is not predicated on success or otherwise in the demonstration of a hypothesis. But in postulating a process that is indeterminate in respect of its outcome, then according to what criteria can we judge something to have occurred. As Cage asks: what has been determined?

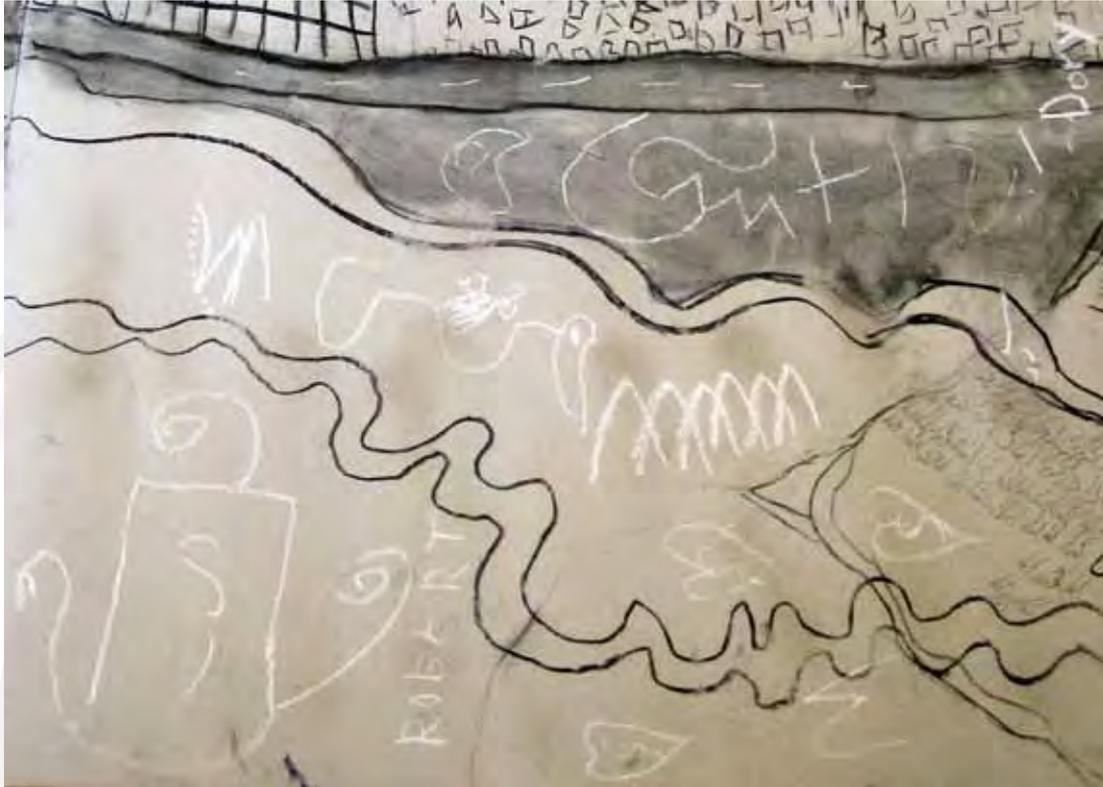
In the case of recording the intrinsic resonant properties of empty spaces and calling it music then the outcome is latent within the architecture of the space. The process of recording serves as a tool of revelation. So what is revealed? What there is to listen to is a sonority that evolves over time. Its duration is the consequence of successive unfolding iterations that reveal the latent properties of an enduring physical space. To call this music is to invite a kind of listening attention whereby it is given to the listener to invent appropriate structures of attention within the frame of what he or she is willing to accept music to be. There is a process of documentation in play but, much like a series of Chinese boxes, what is being documented is the documentary process itself. At this point the question as to whether the environmental context that is the source and origin of the recording is intrinsic in generating that listening becomes a topic for debate. If there is any aesthetic worth in the proposed listening experience then am I listening for the *sound of...* or am I simply listening to sound?

In the case of drawing and recording sounds as they arise within a landscape, what is preserved is indeterminate according to the indeterminate nature of life as it unfolds. What sense I bring to the situation is after the event and here there is an aspect of authorial prescription that comes into play. By inviting a group of children to construct a large floor drawing over a sequence of sheets of paper what emerges is an artwork which, while it sets out to document a physical location with some degree of accuracy, is nevertheless the outcome of a collective act of expression. It is exhibited as such. If this is an invitation to music then it is by way of metaphor: to hear the music in a landscape by way of reading.

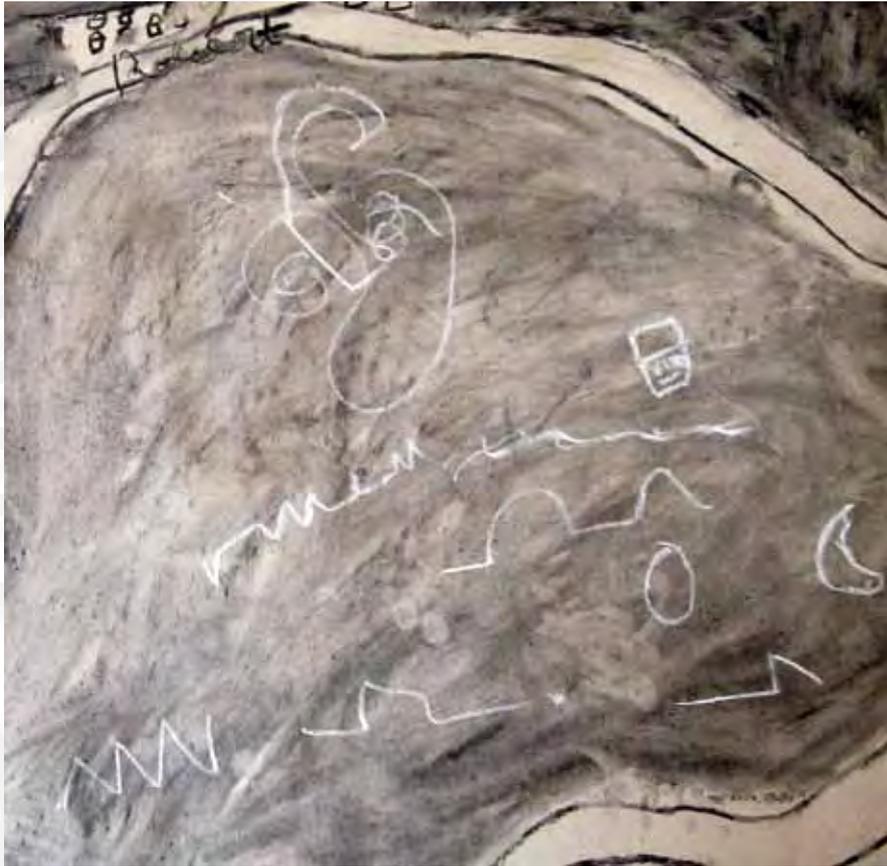
In constructing an audio portrait of the same landscape, the process is one of radiophonic montage. So in this case there are two narrative considerations. As it is created, the Măgura village soundscape unfolds as a physical journey from the far side of the Clanița valley to the village of Măgura. It also unfolds as a passage in time from dawn until dusk. Here the invitation to listen



musically plays itself out along the various kinds of patternings that can be discerned in the oscillation between listening to the *sound of...* and the intrinsic qualities of the sounds in themselves. Moreover the work is designed to be heard in the first instance as an audio component within a museum exhibition. So it is constructed with a particular ear for its acoustic transparency. The intention is that it be listened through, much like looking through a window, creating a counterpoint with the already occurring environmental sound of the museum space.



Here the project returns to the primary archaeological context that was its point of departure, but now framed in relation to a prospective audience. What contribution can listening to the present make to our understanding of the past? Close observation of the sound of nothing has the effect of throwing attention back onto the act of listening itself. When nothing in particular is given to us to listen to, then we have the choice as listeners to be interested and to find satisfaction in our own disinterested listening, or not. When this is adopted as a compositional principle, the task ceases to



be one of presenting an interpretation but of creating a context wherein the listener is satisfied to dwell within a field of listening. The aspiration is that what has been presented occurs as an opportunity to expand the field of listening in a way that gives voice to the past by virtue of our being in relation to it. If we wish to hear that voice, then we must first be willing to interrogate our habitual deafness to our surroundings.

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