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Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Francisco López**

FRANCISCO LÓPEZ is internationally recognized in the underground experimental music scene. Over the last twenty five years he has developed an absolutely personal sound world, based on profound listening. He has realized hundreds of concerts, projects with field recordings, and sound installations around the world. His extended catalogue of sound pieces has been released by more than 140 record labels worldwide, and he has twice been awarded honorary mentions at the competition of Ars Electronica Festival.

Mark McLaren (MM): You make a lot of live performances. Can you explain about some of the problems you are having by trying to reduce the role of the performer / pop star and place emphasis on the experience of deep listening?

Francisco López (FL): The main problem for me is to overcome the traditional set up for music performance, with a stage, frontal sound and the audience thus contemplating the performance. One of my primary goals is to create a situation in which the audience is immersed into the sound matter instead of just listening to it. In addition to this, I see the contemplation of the music realization (through either traditional or electronic instruments) as a dissipative agent acting on the potential of sound alone. That's why I do all my performances in complete darkness, providing blindfolds, and with a surround system around the audience, which I control from the center of the space. It's essential for me to try to become invisible as a performer and to hide the technological tools I use away from the attention of the audience. The role of the performer as a stage character and that of the tools as stage 'props' are thus reduced. However, the role of both as generators of the sonic experience is vividly present and felt in it. With all this I'm trying to reveal hidden phenomenological layers of sonic essence that are normally obscured by both the stage and the instrumental paradigms.

MM: How did working on La Selva influence your relationship to supposed opposites of city and natural sounds?

FL: When sounds (recorded or not) are sounds, and not representations of things, everything changes in terms of our apprehension of this aspect of 'reality'. With representation in mind, some insects sound like electronic devices and some machines could sound like a waterfall. As sounds, we have very few words to describe these perceptual entities (instead of their sources), as Pierre Schaeffer and others have been insistently pointing out without much success in changing widespread misconceptions about what sounds actually are. Keeping this in mind, I don't perceive opposites in categorical groups such as 'city' and 'natural' sounds, for example, since we could say there are no such things.



MM: Can you explain a little about the way you compose? What are you doing beyond intuition?

FL: I would say there's very little beyond intuition. Which is a way of saying that I consider intuition, spirit, personal substance, or whatever we want to call that, to be the most fundamental aspect for composition (as for cooking or drawing, for that matter). What I would call technical aspects of composition can shed light on structural or superficial features of the sound creations but it is my belief that they reveal very little of their real substance and quality. I work with sound doing my own environmental recordings and then treating them (or not) through all kinds of processing tools (both analog and digital), which, as such, is a way of working that thousands of other people worldwide share as well.

MM: Why do you think Galleries and institutions are reluctant to purchase and exhibition sound art that has no visual content ? [for example when the whitney gallery in new york purchased Vitiello's WTC recordings it was the first sound piece they had purchased for 30 years]

FL: I think this has to do with keeping very traditionalist stereotypes on what the places and the values of visual and sonic creations are, as well as the contexts to where they belong. Sound alone is not perceived as something that can be exhibited, purchased or sold in an art context. Most visual artists and curators consider sound as an addition or just one more element -typically a background- of the 'piece' (should a painting be considered incomplete because it has no sound?). It's also interesting (and many times amusing) to notice that many visual art people with seemingly 'radical' conceptions on what art is have quite mainstream musical interests or conceptions on what music is.

MM: Explain to me how you think you have developed your characteristic sound. What were the musics that you were listening to in the eighties that affected you, what led you to become involved in music?

FL: I do listen to a lot of different music, from "experimental" to jazz, film soundtracks, ethnic music, bossa nova, grindcore... Like many other people, I believe all these things have an influence on the way I do things when it comes to the work with sound. However, I think in my personal experience listening to the "real world" (doing lots of field recordings, working with them) -particularly natural sound environments- has actually been the main influence in terms of expanding textural and structural possibilities. The amplitude of dynamics, frequency spectrum, timbre variety, temporal pace, and many other sound features, in that "real world" is just astonishing and a source of endless inspiration for me. I've learnt more from that ongoing experience than from any music. It has shown me a lot about how restricted are the usual standards in most music and has given me the inspiration and the courage to explore other territories of sound creation. A lot of people wrongly perceive these territories (particularly those where there's an extreme subtlety) as something "conceptual", when in fact they're reflections of very natural, common things.

MM: Your statement about performance seems very involved with an immersive of experience in sound. Is this any way related to the theories of Deep Listening? And on the other hand do you place much value in 'shallow listening', where music is based around other maybe more domestic activities such as reading or washing or talking?

FL: There is a long history of deep, profound, dedicated modes of listening to sound and music, from religious experiences to technical situations. Without having a specific religious goal, I have a strong



interest and commitment in creating a live experience that becomes a intensely spiritual and transformative experience. This is actually what I look for in the work of other artists, both with sound and with other means. I have very little interest in creating or attending a performance to just listen to music. There are of course some cases in which this is alright, I'm not despising any other form of music performance that doesn't attain (or has no intention of attaining) that level of "intensity". But my interest is definitely in the direction of a very demanding, very intense live experience, and I certainly believe that in most music there is way more of the first than the latter. Concerning any form of "shallow listening" (like the traditional concept of ambient music), of course this happens all the time and we all do it sometimes, but this is like having a delicious meal and just not putting any attention to the food: it's just a shame.

MM: You seem happy to work using intuition. How do you feel the group of musicians working with processed field recording can develop if people don't try to establish a written vocabulary of process and methodology that tries to distance itself from its roots both in post-techno and academic genres?

FL: I really think that developing a vocabulary of process and methodology for this kind of work with processed field recordings (or any other with sound, for that matter) doesn't help at all to make the work any better or any more interesting or any more developed. To me, the whole historical academic experience (and the popular version of it through magazines in techno and popular music) is a proof of the complete uselessness of such attempts. The reason for this, I believe, is in the fact that a translation into language of aural entities and processes always proves to be a poor -and unnecessary- version of these phenomena, which we can indeed present, perceive and deal with as they are. Because of the experience with the work with sound (both mine and that of other artists) I can't help but seeing these attempts at categorizing and verbalizing as a futile waste of time, really. The best way to "develop" is to actually do work, and a lot of people are actually doing it. I think it was Pollock who said that the best critique of a painting is to put another painting next to it.

MM: You mention trying to approach a religious experience in terms of creating a deep listening environment to perform in. What experiences have you had with sound becoming transcendent or mystic? Can you see a connection between this secular intensity and Werner Herzog's idea of ecstatic landscapes.

FL: Ecstasy can indeed be one of the manifestations of a transcendent experience but there are others, with different degrees of intensity and with diverse descriptions by different people, that are hardly communicable in a precise way. I grew up in a big city but spent all summers in a small town in the countryside. Both worlds provided ample opportunity of prolonged experiences for a committed solitary listener like me. For reasons unknown to me, I've always been attracted by human-devoid sonic environments, and solitude has been for me a necessary condition for anything close to a transcendent experience. Surprisingly enough, you can have such an experience in the most unlikely or unexpected situations, like just laying down on a forest floor or listening to a piece of repetitive machinery. There have been, however, a few experiences that caused a large-scale impact in my perception of sonic matter, giving rise at times to something I could consider as a transcendent experience. That was the case during my work in the Cost Rican rain forest, a truly acousmatic world where a myriad things can be heard and almost nothing can be seen.



MM: I understand the need to defend music from journalism and that music by it's very nature contains information that cannot be transferred into language. But surely there must be something that is worth saying about the methods you employ to create and think about your music.

FL: To me, it's not so much that these things cannot be translated into language (some things can). I make an emphasis in not revealing technical or compositional aspects of the work because I believe this has a dissipative effect on the perception of the actual work created. I work through a long and elaborated process of mutation of the sound materials, that is closer to evolution (with a common stem, with diversification, and with the apparition of new sonic "species") than to anything else. I'm obsessed with precision, nuance, and detail, both in the features of the sound materials and in the structural and perceptual aspects of the work, including the sense of virtual space in the pieces and the pace of sonic events. All of this requires extensive studio work and places me far away from any interest in improvisation, for example.

MM: Can you give me any specific examples of how "real world" sounds have been 'astonishing and a source of endless inspiration' for yourself.

FL: A cyclone in the rain forest. Wind in Patagonia. A bumblebee close to the microphone. A computer room controlling switches in a large apartment building. A close up recording of a fireplace. A choir of frogs. A moving flag pole through a contact microphone... but you'd have to hear the actual sounds!

links:

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