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Sibelius Beyond Categorical Limits

Submitted by *Daniel M. Grimley* on March 14, 2016 - 9:51am



Categories and Borders

Addressing the issue of how one could—or should—listen beyond categorical limits presupposes the more preliminary question of where (and how) such limits are drawn and what kinds of categories they serve to demarcate, police, or enclose. As Michel Foucault's work has shown, categories and limits themselves constitute boundaries of knowledge that shape and determine our

disciplinary epistemologies, and do much more than merely organize or distribute received patterns of understanding. Foucault's work argues for an archaeological approach to critical historical enquiry (Foucault, 2002: 151-6): an excavatory model of analysis that recalibrates our sense of agency, temporal progression, and spatial awareness. Under such a Foucauldian regime, the borderlands that separate seemingly diverse fields of enquiry, as I've argued elsewhere (Grimley, 2010: 394), can appear porous or impenetrable: they may be accessible to easy passage or resistant to any swift change of state or place. One of the principal challenges for a historically attuned ecomusicology in navigating such complex scholarly terrain is the ability to maintain a clear feeling for disciplinary identity that simultaneously respects the tensions and obstacles involved in such cross-disciplinary encounters. If ecomusicology emerges as a thornier, less comfortably amenable discourse as a result, the net result can only be a positive scholarly gain.

Contemplating the distance traversed in such conversations, however, prompts us to think again about the status of borderlands, whether acoustic, academic or geopolitical. As W J T Mitchell and others have argued (Selwyn, 1995; Paasi, 1996; Mitchell, 2002 [1994]), borders assume a wide variety of scales and forms: marches or buffer zones, borders serve as points of transition, transfer, migration and exile, resistance, exclusion, surveillance, violence, remembrance and erasure. Borders can similarly be geophysical, climatological, biological, political, linguistic, and auditory. Borderlands are frequently forgotten, mislaid, and neglected: they become defined as edgelands, margins, wastelands or wilderness. But if such sites are overlooked in the conventional sense, they can also be overheard in another, as sites of acute attentiveness and surveillance. Borders may be sites of deafness, blindness, amnesia and myopia. Alternatively, they can serve as thresholds or gateways, means of access that permit productive cultural and economic exchange or guarded by "peace walls" that are heavily politically freighted: one need only to pause and think about the sound either side of the razor-wire tipped fences that thread the landscape in Israel/Palestine, South Africa, or Northern Ireland to realize the significance of sound's irresistible fluidity, its ability to seep through, slip over, and echo back in ways that challenge, channel and reshape more concrete physical topographies (Labelle, 2010).

Hearing Finland Critically: Four Modalities

Border zones operate at multiple temporal-spatial levels. Thinking about Finland ecomusicologically provides a useful case-study: as a nation-state, it has conventionally been conceived as a barrier or frontier between east and west (frequently under conditions of extreme geopolitical tension or stress). Furthermore, Finland emerged and defined itself at a crucial historical moment of transition (the early twentieth century) when ideas of landscape, place and space were radically rethought and redrawn (Häyrynen, 2008). Contemplating sound and music in Finland, especially from beyond its borders, demands a re-centered notion of periphery and edge. Far from being a marginal space, in other words, Finland more properly constitutes a political, cultural, aesthetic, and disciplinary front line: one that transcends the categorical limits of the nation and embraces a wider, more multi-tiered sense of regionality.

The remainder of this essay briefly outlines four discursive modalities of landscape as a creative, historical and discursive border zone, in order to sketch some of the categories and limits that have shaped our understanding of the

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Book Review: Toward an Anthropology of Ambient Sound



Toward an Anthropology of Ambient Sound, Edited by Christine Guillebaud. New-York/Oxon: Routledge, 2017. [239 pp., illus. ISBN: 978-1-138-80127-1]. (Each paper is referenced with the author's name and the geographical location of its research subject) ...

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relationship between music, space and place. The first modality, the *monumentalization of landscape*, is symbolized by Eila Hiltunen's well-known sculpture "Credo" (1962-7), better known as the Sibelius memorial [fig. 1]. Located on the edge of downtown Helsinki in carefully landscaped grounds leading from the city to the open-air museum on Seurasaari, Hiltunen's monument was the prize-winning entry in a 1960 competition to commemorate the composer after his death in 1957. Hiltunen's design was controversial because of its apparently abstract quality: a small bust was later added to the corner of the monument to appease popular concerns. But Hiltunen's sculpture is striking for the way that it grounds metaphors of landscape, place, and time in Sibelius reception: the stainless steel tubes which comprise the main body of the design appear like organ pipes close up, or like a shifting wave or curtain of light (the aurora borealis) from a distance. Despite its imposing size, Hiltunen's sculpture resists easy containment or framing; the play of light across the metallic front of the monument and sound of the wind down the hollow steel tubes animating the design even as it appears still and frozen from across the park (Grimley, 2011: 338-347).

Hiltunen's design draws not only on the rich legacy of landscape imagery in Sibelius reception, but also from a second modality: the tradition of *topographic representation* in Finnish art and literature. This body of work, whose foremost exemplars include Zachris Topelius's seminal volumes *Finland framställt i teckningar* (1845-52) and *Boken om Vårt Land/Mamma-Kirja* (1875) and Johan Ludvig Runeberg's travelogue, *En resa i Finland* (1873), was instrumental in shaping Finnish perceptions of a national topography, over and above issues of language, governance and ethnicity, at a time when debates about the status and nature of Finnish national identity came under particular pressure (Fewster, 2006). For a younger generation of topographers, working under the conditions of extreme Russian political censorship, the work of Topelius and Runeberg became a canonic source-text for symbolic representations of Finland that would otherwise have seemed dangerously inflammatory in the political regime of the Russian Grand Duchy (Häyrynen, 2008: 488-92). The haunting images recorded by Into Konrad Inha (1865-1930), a landscape photographer and conservationist who was a close friend and contemporary of Sibelius and whose colleagues included a generation of writers and artists such as Juhani Aho, Pekka Halonen, Eero Järnefelt, and Akseli Gallen-Kallela, are powerful examples of the way in which a rich lexicon of the Finnish landscape was assembled and curated. Inha's work includes volumes entitled *Suomi kuvissa* ("Finland in Pictures," 1892-6) and, with an especially delicate sense of political diplomacy, *Vienan Karjalan kuvausmatka* ("A Journey for Taking Pictures in Russian Karelia," 1894); Inha's images of agricultural workers and their routines were commissioned for the Finnish pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, celebrating (it was supposed) Finland's emergence from an essentially agrarian backwater into a modern industrialized nation state. Yet Inha's work is also remarkable for its concern with liminality and states of transference: his carefully staged picture of runic singers holding hands, especially the old bardic seer Miihkali Arhippainen, alongside evocative panoramic views of privileged sites such as Lake Päijänne [figs. 2 and 3] points to an underlying tension in his photographs, between the intensively detailed attention to geographic/ethnographic specificity versus the commodification of landscape for recreation, academic enquiry, and territorial domination. Similar tensions of scale, register and authority continued to strain and fracture Finnish notions of landscape, not least during the 1918 civil war and during Finland's emergence as a key geopolitical frontier between east and western blocs post-World War II: the apparent permanence of landscape as a physical environment is in sharp opposition to its fragility as a cultural, political, and material presence in the Finnish imagination.

A third modality of landscape draws equally on Inha's work and the shifting notions of territory and scale that emerge from his pictures: *landscape as text*. Hiltunen's monument has already pointed to the ways in which the reception of Sibelius's work has often been grounded in images of landscape and nature. Though the landscape associations of many of Sibelius's major works have been extensively assessed, a more neglected example of this pattern of reception is one of his very last compositions, the *Fünf Skizzen/Viisi Luonnosta*, op. 114. The complex genesis and publication history of the work, composed after the Seventh Symphony and *Tapiola*, and hence contemporary with Sibelius's work on the ultimately abortive Eighth Symphony, has been elegantly summarized by Anna Pulkkis in her critical edition of Sibelius's piano music. First published only posthumously by Fazer in 1973, the composition may originally have been prompted by Sibelius's American publisher Carl Fischer, who sought to capitalize on the domestic market for easy piano music: Sibelius offered the pieces to Fischer in a letter dated 15 Feb 1929 (National Library Collection 206.44), with the following titles: "Landscape," "Winter-Scenery," "The Wood Wind," "Song in the Wood," and "Spring Vision." The manuscript was delivered by 23 May, but returned to Sibelius on 7 September, because of changes in copyright provision and the expected returns on new works. Sibelius subsequently offered the compositions to his German publisher Breitkopf & Härtel, and then took the scores back again to make further revisions. At this point, Sibelius added new German titles, which differ in subtle but important respects from their English equivalents: "Landschaft," "Winterbild," "Der Deich," [sic—"Teich" is the correct translation] "Lied im Walde," and "Im Frühling." The materials were later offered to the Finnish publisher R. E. Westerlund, at the end of the Second World War in 1945, who prepared copies in advance of publication (which were overseen and corrected by Sibelius), and which included newly added Finnish titles ("Maisema," "Talvikuva," "Metsälampi" [to which Sibelius added the Swedish "Skogstjärn"]; "Metsälaulu," and "Kevätnäky"). Sibelius, however, evidently continued to harbor doubts

about the opus, and he wrote to his son-in-law Jussi Jalas on 24 Feb 1945 that such small pieces “are not exactly my province. It is not until I have large forms in front of me that I feel I am on my own ground.” (Sibelius, 2011: xiii)

At one level, the two central numbers, “Forest Lake” and “Forest Song,” clearly belong to the generic category of Nordic nature miniature popularized by earlier works such as Grieg’s *Lyric Pieces*. At another level, however, they present a very different kind of landscape representation, one that is less indebted to pictorial modes of perception and which need not be heard as exclusively Finnish. Landscape here serves as a creative resource, an acoustic signal or process of abstraction. Both pieces play productively with the listener’s sense of proximity and distance, and problematize familiar notions of agency and subject position. The first number, “The Forest Lake,” for example, can be understood as the intensive acoustic study of a single modal sonority: a Dorian sound sheet assembled from stacked thirds (Murtomäki, 2004: 150-1), but with complex harmonic undertones corresponding to the dissonant upper frequencies of certain kinds of nature sounds or other unpitched noise (ex. 1). The modal mixture in m. 14, for example, introduces a darker coloring into the music’s modal field, destabilizing the texture’s prevailing melodic contour and intervallic symmetry. The work’s double immersive waves (at mm. 19 and 37) threaten to overwhelm its registral and dynamic boundaries, puncturing the music’s otherwise repetitive ostinato figuration: the lake’s Aeolian sounds hence become a feedback “loop,” generating a series of chromatic shadows whose presence initially seems baleful but ultimately proves, in the final measures, more ambivalent or equivocal in mood and affect.

In the second number, “Forest Song,” the idea of singing is en/invoked texturally within the middle (tenor) tessitura of the instrument. But the question of precisely whose song is performed within the work remains unclear. Harmonically, the music’s tension is generated between the predominantly octatonic content of the right hand (collection II), the Lydian-Dorian modal inflection of the inner parts, and the incursion of complementary octatonic materials (collection III, mm. 18-25ff). Though a brief moment of clearer melodic articulation at the *mezza voce* (m. 33) suggests a heightened sense of agency the music deflects any sustained attempt at linguistic meaning or signification (ex. 2). “Forest Song” offers no straightforward formal or expressive synthesis but rather a rupture or aporia in the “nature scene:” the enharmonic $e<sharp>/f<natural>$ in m. 42 that acts as a formal pivot, heralding a return of the opening octatonic ostinato. “Forest Song” thus threatens or dismantles the stable boundaries between nature, culture, listening subject, and creative agency, even as it folds its idea of landscape back within the echoing fragments of its ostinato figure within its closing bars.

This close reading of Sibelius’s op. 114 invites comparison with a fourth modality of landscape, *landscape as cartography*, represented by Johannes Gabriel Granö’s ground-breaking *Pure Geography* (*Puhdas Maantiede/Reine Geographie*, 1929). First published in German, and then in Finnish 2 years later, Granö’s work proposes a systematic haptic geography of landscape perception. The volume’s aim, Granö explains in the preface, “is to demonstrate that the topic of geographical research is the human environment, *understood as the whole complex of phenomena and objects that can be perceived by the senses.*” [p. 1, my emphasis] From this threshold, the volume proposes a threefold hierarchical model of geographical perception, comprising:

1. the observable space or field of vision/hearing: landscape as prospect or spectacle;
2. aspects of heat, humidity, pressure, sound, smell: the haptic medium of landscape; and
3. the base, substrate or fundamental tone of landscape.

Granö draws his preoccupation with the “field of hearing” from a further contemporary source: Jussi Seppä’s *Luonnon löytöjä. Lintunäkymiä ja –kuulumia* (“Findings in Nature: Ornithological Sights and Sounds” (Porvoo: WSOY, 1928)), the first book in Finland to employ the term and one that was especially concerned with the sonic and spatial qualities of particular landscapes construed less on a national but rather at a (micro)regional level.

This close attention to the intricate sonic detail of landscape provides the basis for Granö’s auditory analysis of Valosaari, an island in the south-eastern Finnish lake district: one of the earliest published soundscape studies in the field. As Granö explains, “the common auditory phenomena characterising natural proximities include the roar of the waves, cascades, or rapids, the sough of the wind in the forest and the singing of birds, while the ‘field of hearing’ of artificial proximities is characterized by human voices and the noise of traffic and industry.” (Granö, 1997: 126) Beyond the familiar distinction between natural and artificial noise, however, lies a more fine-grained concern with questions of proximity and distance: the way in which sound leaks, is transformed, or refracted by physical objects within the landscape; the intensity or duration of particular sounds heard from precise locations within the auditory field; and the seasonal shifts in tone and register: “sounds produced by people always in summer; produced by people sometimes in summer; produced by people frequently at all times of the year (boating route, ice road).” (Ibid: 127)

Granö's analysis might be read superficially as an attempt to capture the acoustic quality of a particular place in scientific, rational fashion. But his work more properly belongs to a complex tradition of landscape representation in which sound plays a more destabilizing role. The legacy of Granö's model, and the four modalities of landscape as border zone outlined in this essay, can be traced in more contemporary research, for example the work of the Finnish sound artist Simo Alitalo, based in Turku in south-western Finland, who has been involved with the ongoing Finnish sound-mapping project (<http://kartta.aanimaisemat.fi>). Like Granö, Alitalo substitutes the conventional Finnish term for soundscape "äänimaisema" (literally meaning a "landscape of sound") with a cognate term "kuuluma," stressing the act of audition or hearing: a critical turn consistent with Tim Ingold's recent polemic against the idea of soundscape (Ingold, 2006) and one adopted by other Finnish acoustic ecologists such as Heikki Uimonen.

In attending more closely to the media through which sound and landscape are shaped and formed, in light of writing on sound and landscape from Granö to the present day, and cogniscent of the cultural and political work performed by landscape as it is embedded within the historiographies of Finnish music, we are encouraged to reflect critically upon the ontological nature and status of the borders, liminalities, and thresholds of sound. Through this process, we can gain a clearer sense of the epistemological status of landscape, sound, immersion, and the politics of representation: categories that provoke more difficult questions about subjectivity and agency within a (post)affective critical regime. This renewed attention to landscape within ecomusicology might serve as a sign of our discipline's seemingly perennial lateness—its delayed concern with pressing aesthetic, historic and scholarly issues with which other disciplines appear to have engaged many years earlier. But, in asking us to listen beyond our categorical limits, as with the case of Sibelius's landscapes, musicology can cautiously clear fresh critical ground. Contemplating such questions in Sibelius's anniversary year feels like a good place to start.

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