



Cathy Lane & Angus Carlyle **In the Field**

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# In the Field

## The Art of Field Recording

Cathy Lane & Angus Carlyle



## Davide Tidoni

Interviewed by Angus Carlyle

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Davide Tidoni's reputation preceded any actual introduction to his work. A colleague talked about Davide's long-standing participant ethnography with fans of Brescia football club; an MA student mentioned one of Davide's compositions in a Kunstradio-Radiokunst broadcast; and one of my friends had been to a performance of Davide's at the Barbican Centre in London.

In investigating his work, his contribution to the Kunstradio broadcast was my first port of call. 'L'Amicizia con la cioca' is an extended field recording, apparently unedited and unprocessed, where it is the movement of the microphone and the world around it that provides the dramatic energy. Dogs bark, leave are called back by shepherds who talk, sniff, stay silent, gesture, pace and survey their herd of cattle with their ringing bells. As Tidoni has it, a "relational listening quality resides between shepherd, animals and environment".

Davide didn't want me to record him talking at our first meeting in London. Instead we spent the morning on the grass of London Fields, chatting and listening.

When did you first start to do something that you now recognise as field recording?

Ah, yes, I remember, it was when I was about 8 years old and a friend of my father gave me a child's tape recorder. I still have some of those cassettes that I recorded and for me that is field recording. To be honest I still have yet to understand what field recording is I've just looked it up on the internet before we started... I think that categories in general should always be questioned. It is better to build up your own constellation of meanings from real experience than relying on something that is taken from granted and doesn't come from your own personal story. For me field recording is concerned with a certain predisposition (openness) to the field and its exploration (relation). To me every act of recording is a growth process, an encounter and exchange. Recording implies an ongoing questioning and understanding of the self (David Kleinberg-Levin, *The Listening Self*); an awareness-raising process about your capacities and orientation in respect to a certain space, situation or context what do I do here? where is my place? what can I do? In terms of my current understanding of field recording I can see that not much has changed between how I work today and what I was doing when I was 8 years old.

How did your 8 year-old self define the field?

I think the field was the field of the relation, the emotional exposure of the self and the interaction with the context. It was a kind of performing self that engaged in creating my own space inside a very busy domestic framework. In those first recordings I was very present, particularly through my voice; and today my voice inhabits my contemporary recordings as a kind of an explicit clarification of my presence within the field.

How long did you keep recording for?

This is a sad story and it relates to what I said about my childhood domestic life being so busy! After I had been using the recorder for around a month it stopped working. Looking back it must have been because the battery had died but at the time, of course, I was too young to realise. So one Sunday when we were in the basement I asked my father to repair it but he was just too busy, he needed to finish eating before heading to the church where he was going to sing. So I resolved to fix it, unscrewing everything but I ended up completely destroying the recorder in the process! The other side of my entry into the world of field recording paints my father in a better light because

he himself was very into recording political meetings. He used to record the meetings on tape, take a photograph of the poster advertising the meeting and put that photo inside the cassette box. He had around about 100 of these tapes. I remember that one day—and I still have three minutes of this recording—when I was 4, my sister was 5 and my other brother was 2, my father recorded our voices for the first time and I think that this, too, was part of the influence.

*What happened after the tape recorder broke?*

I waited until my father got a new recorder so I could use his old one. When I was 12 or 13 I recorded myself drumming in the basement of my house. I have maybe 20 tapes of me drumming. I feel I could base a project on these drumming tapes, a performance perhaps, maybe held in the house in Italy itself. I have to find the right format for this that would involve me listening back for the first time to all these tapes. Why did I do all this recording if I almost never listened back? This is a big question for me. I have many answers that lie somewhere between possession and control and something like an anxious desire for accumulation. Somewhere between survival instinct and the uncertainty of the future. I have always been impatient to get something good on tape, impatient to create something out of it one day in the future.

On a very biographical level, those tapes bring me back to the emotional feelings and relational context under which I was recording. Those recordings are not only about what is taped itself—about recording this rhythm or that solo—but actually concern what happens before and what happens after. I remember I was not able to cut me out from the outside the sounds from other rooms and from the neighbors. I didn't know how to separate me from the external and the extraneous. It would be nice to listen to the tapes now and see how this aspect emerges.

*Is there a parallel between the process you describe in connection to the drums—where what happened before and after you pressed record was equally important—and another process that you engage with today where instead of drumming, the connection is between recording and listening?*

Drumming for me signified very much in terms of self exposure, space negotiation, energy balancing, and relational exchange (Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*). This self-reflexive/all-embracing approach parallels my current research for different reasons. First you have the interpenetration and permeability towards what is already there. Then you have the desire to modify what is already there to produce

space and a certain capacity responsiveness to deal with external forces.

To give you a very simple but efficacious example, this morning I have moved into a new home and my new house-mate returned from College and had to start practising some basic chord exercises on an electronic piano. His volume was very subtle, there was a deep humming from the ventilation system, there was constant dripping from the air conditioning. There are no doors in the house, so everything connects. I started recording, integrating all this together with the sound of my feet moving on the wooden floor and me opening and closing the cabinet of the ventilation system so I could adjust the bass presence. After a while, my house-mate got stuck on the same chord for 5 minutes. I didn't like it so I had to find a strategy for evolving the situation. I put the mic in my nose in order to cut out the piano. After a few deep inhalations I moved to the wall and jumped out on the roof in order to get some wind distortion and finish the recording. I forgot to mention that I was doing this without headphones. Sometimes I prefer to listen to the space with naked ear and entire body. What you get from this story is that recording for me includes a certain level of attention for gestures and movements which are in dialogue with the space and dramaturgically interact with the context.

I also use microphone and recording equipment in a scenographic way, as objects to play with, things with their own set of distinctive properties, affordances and constraints (Donald Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things*). So there's another layer that interests me and that goes beyond recording in itself. What fascinates me most is the situated relational process that I enact on the field through listening. It's basically about what I can do together with a certain sound in a certain situation. A sort of performance that embeds immediacy, curiosity and physicality. Anyway, at the end my new house-mate was horrified: "But no, that wasn't even a real piano! How could you record that?"

*Ever since we met and spent the morning in London Fields, I have been inspired by the idea you developed about the body itself always being a recorder. That seems to crystallise something special about what field recording practice might be: an approach that may not even require the need to be hooked up to a technological apparatus. Have I got that right?*

This idea of 'recording with your own body' came out within the workshop I was leading at the Field Studies summer school in London last September. Together with the group we spent more than 3 days exploring different ways of being bodily engaged with space and listening. Each of the participants had to 'record' gestures, positions and

movements from individual exploratory walks and then re-enact them during collective improvisation. 'The main aim was to work on the body as first interface and develop corporeal knowledge in order to consider under a different light our relation to recording technology and refine the quality of our listening, presence and attention in space.

What also interests me about this idea of recording with the body are the socio-political implications that come into play anytime a body performs attentive listening, especially in public space. Every posture and movement you take in the city is charged with additional contextual meanings. It's such a revealing experience to see how a sensitive body can break social conventions and counteract the rhythms of the city. The way you carry your body the quality of your listening your speed, tempo, attention, they all convey a certain degree of intentionality. You can easily be perceived as a menacing presence for the reason that you are walking at slow pace and are pursuing an ambiguous trajectory. If you look at the police manuals they say that the best way to recognize a potential suspect is to see if he moves following the flow of people or if he steps out and breaks the continuity. I like the idea of being a potential suspect and that's more or less what I proposed to the participants of my workshop. A proposition to diversity and the search of your own rhythm. I'm a long way from having reached that myself... We all share this political responsibility.

*If recording is about a perceptive sensibility that finds its connections to social implication, is it possible to talk about good recordings, or bad recordings or even favourite recordings?*

Recordings are about chance and, as such, improvisation is very much at the heart of how I record. Sometimes I even take recordings off a camera but, irrespective of any 'sound quality', what is important about some of those recordings is the emotions and feeling they convey. It very much depends on intentions and how the listening quality that you establish can be represented and reconstructed in a recording. I don't know if, then, there can be good or bad recordings. If you press me on what are my favourite recordings then I remember that I did record between the ages of 8 and 12! I got hold of my father's old recorder when he replaced it with a new one. I have some great recordings of my brother and I playing *The Neverending Story* when I was Morla the turtle and he was Atreyu. I think I would need to go back to those recordings and the emotions they convey and what they express about family relationships and memories.

*What about the work you were doing in relation to the New Theatre Music Park in Florence, work that became the 'New Shape of Public Architecture'?*

Ah yes! It is broadcast as part of Nuovi Paesaggi this very night on Radio Papesse.

*Oh no! I have missed it then! That was the work where you recorded in that little house that was left stranded in the middle of that huge gentrification project. Did the workers who you were with speak in Italian?*

Yes, they were both Romanian so they were not so fluent and, actually, they were quite silent. They were my saviours together with my mum and curator Lucia Farinati. Ciao Dragosc, ciao Macje, ciao Mami, ciao Lucia! I can read to you my own introduction to the project if you would like.

The project 'The New Shape of Public Architecture' transfigures the personal conflict I have experienced while confronting the shapes of the construction site of Florence's New Theatre Music Park.

Since my very first visit to the site of the new building, I have encountered many difficulties in finding an emotional distance in order to relate to the project of the New Theatre. It wasn't easy for me to impartially accept the contradictory neglect shown by the site, and it took quite a long time for me to devise a strategy that would allow me to exalt such an aggression.

It was only by establishing a quality relationship with a couple of workers from the site, and by taking possession of the space by means of collective interventions, that I was able to face the task and handle 'the new shape of public architecture' that the theatre's project suggests. Those are the strategies I used in order not to succumb. The search for the self, the reinforcement of localized resistance, and the acknowledgement of the gratifying joy that comes from group sharing.

The site was all about brandization of public space, autonomy of the architectural project, cultural marketing, celebration, and even corruption. I was wondering how I could do a field recording project here when what was probably more appropriate would have been to stage a riot. But I didn't have the contacts necessary to have a riot... plus since Florence is not my city, I didn't feel that I belonged to it enough to make (and accept the consequences of) something like a riot... So, instead of taking an instinctive impetuous stance, I started from the everyday, from the people I met on the construction site, the workers



themselves. This allowed me to listen to the site, to listen to them, to listen through them. At the end it ended up like a re-appropriation of the site through the *in situ* playback of Beethoven's 9th Symphony the piece that was performed on the occasion of the temporary opening of the opera house through the cooperative actions of myself and the workers.

The piece is framed by the staging of a spoken intimate and ironic explanatory introduction that contextualizes the piece within a critical framework. What's behind that strategy is a certain awareness of media, mediation and representation; an approach that also attaches to the Beethoven since what you hear at the end of the piece is one of the workers asking to turn off "that horrible music" which then disappears leaving our voices and showing that the piece was recorded for 12 minutes in one single take. This sense of media awareness is something that I often try to incorporate into my recordings, that's another reason why I might talk to the microphone, or touch it, or hug it, or put it in my pocket. I'm very much into the deconstruction of the recording process as an activity *per se* and the questioning of representational models. That's also what I'm trying to make explicit with my way of recording. A demystification of the artistic process through an emphasis on the relational and the participative.

*The 'New Shape of Public Architecture' piece which you have just described seems to have an emotional, aesthetic and intellectual integrity that derives from your particular relationship to recording and to yourself. But how can you transmit that relationship to your forthcoming appearance on the CD compilation on the Korean label Balloon & Needle?*

(Laughs) That is what I am thinking about now! They are a fantastic label who are engaged with new music performance and the noise scene. They asked me to contribute to their new compilation which is about music made with balloon and/or needle they got the input from my project 'A Balloon for...'. I have now a few ideas for the compilation. One of these is just to talk out loud about my project 'A Balloon for...' improvising or reading a text. In the background you will have a collection of my recordings of balloons being popped which is a strategy I employ to investigate space. Another possibility relates to 'A Balloon for Sjoerd's Flat', a specific house performance I did recently in Rotterdam when I popped a balloon in occasion of my leaving one house on the way to another. The performance was a very intimate reflection of the nomadic life I have been living since 2007 and took the shape of gift, a 'thank you' to the house that welcomed me and hosted me for one month after my arrival to the Netherlands. The

way I would transpose that performance as audio piece would be to emphasise the sociality of the event itself more than the popping of the balloon which was anyway kind of impressive; it was the one from the corridor between my former room and the kitchen, a very solid-pitch and compact, fluttering reverb. Another potential approach would be to work with my friend Attila Faravelli to take the balloon popping to a more 'blasting enthusiastic hardcore' level in which you would hear us going wild in the street interspersed with distorted balloons popping and their (clipped) reverberation in spaces that we encounter during our exploration. This strategy would allow me to transfer the strong emotional intensity and physical impact violent shock of the poppings to the CD listeners.

The way I present the project 'A Balloon for...' changes every time according to the context and in relation to the formats I work with. It runs a continuum from the intimacy of leaving a house with an invited audience of people I know to the more public domain during festivals with groups of people out at night listening to the city, such as the work for Ars Electronica 'A Balloon For Linz'. I also presented it as an improvised performance as was the case for 'A Balloon for the Barbican', originally born as a video and then, after I was prohibited to show it to the audience because two cops had been recorded on camera, it turned into a performance just 10 minutes before the audience came in at the Barbican Centre last February.

Going back to your question, for the CD on Balloon & Needle, I need to discover the best way to connect the balloon popping to the CD format. I'll try out the three different options I told you, compare positive and negative aspects of each of them and see what comes out.

*Your take on field recording is so distinctive. You open up that box called 'recording' and you find new things in it; then you open up that bag called 'field' and you pull out something unexpected. Do you listen to work by other field recordists?*

On the one hand, I am happy to talk about this but, on the other hand, although I have done lots of field recording, I feel quite disconnected from the scene, apart from, perhaps, the 'New Shape of Public Architecture' for Radio Papeste and another piece for Kunstradio. When I came here to the Netherlands to study with Raviv Ganchrow at the Institute of Sonology, I decided to bring no music with me. If I now open up the folder on my computer that contains my music, we shall see what it contains after two months here downloading music from the internet. I'm looking at it now and I will read you the names: Black Flag, Colonna Infame Skinhead, Crass, Cro-Mags, Hellfish, Indigesti, KaosOne, Let

Them Eat Jelly Beans, Maruosa, Meteor, Raging Speedhorn, Rotovator,  
Otto Von Schirac, Ove Naxx...

*There is not much field recording there!*

Well, there is another category called 'Ethnomusicology' and that contains music in dialect from Brescia, the area that I grew up and traditional quarry workers and mine workers songs. There is also Judee Sill, Alessandro Fiori, Cat Power, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mariposa, David Tudor, Roland Kirk, Gurdjieff, and Luigi Tenco.

*But your collection of terrace songs from Brescia Calcio football club, that sounds like an amazing field-recording project, no?*

Yes, I have ten years worth of recordings mainly from the Ultras group Brescia 1911. On a very existential level it's all about the conflict between control and rebellion, chaos and order, repression and re-appropriation and how these oppositions confront and rely on each other. Brought back into a more circumscribed framework it's a history of the impact of modern football politics on the autonomous space of football terraces. An investigation on how supporters' participative ways of assisting/creating the game had to be negotiated according to sport mediatization and domestication of public life. Everything through the reading of the sonic implications that this collision produced. Implications that I experienced in first person during a ten year (hyper)participatory field analysis. To make it potent I need time, peace and money. Maybe CRISAP can give me a hand with this? The recordings show, in a way, how I approach the idea of recording. For example, when I am in a stadium, I want to sing, I can't not sing, and so sometimes although the temptation might be to listen to the others, what you hear is me singing away. Sometimes I would give the recorder to another fan but maybe he would put it in his pocket or even switch it off. This is how I got into the social side of recording. I was eager to record but realised that I had to first develop the right kinds of relationships with the other people there. I needed to appreciate how to acquire the appropriate kinds of social capital to position myself at the right part of a stadium or in the right part of the bus that was transporting fans to away matches. Unless you connect yourself or empower yourself in these situations, it is not easy to make recordings. It is about listening to the site and knowing what is possible and what is not possible, what feels comfortable and what doesn't feel comfortable, knowing, as I said, that your position in the space is part of how that space is produced. Anyway, what helped me most to get access to the field was my true passion for chanting, my spontaneous

performing attitude, my perseverance and reliability. Only once my face became familiar to group members, and only after supporters came to think of me as an insider, did I feel confident walking alongside them with audio recording equipment. At that stage, the group on the whole did not perceive me as a menacing presence; to them I was not someone who was going to use the material I was collecting to make a case against them or in order to make money.

