



This collection of writing engages with the sounding cultures of football as sonic spectacle; as auditory delight; as a source of visceral electrifying energy; as a means of locating, identifying and articulating ourselves as political subjects. The sounds of football are part of our daily lives. The ephemeral grassroots soundings of parish council pitches. The buzz of late night radio commentary. The roar of the crowd seeping out into the night and spreading like a firm mist across nearby streets. The on-pitch communication of the players stick it in the mixer! Corner flags whipped into sound-making action by the breeze. The crack as a ball strikes the crossbar. The thud of football on boot then grass and soil as the goalkeeper sends it long downfield. The incessant voice of the popular media. The rattle of the line-marker and the slosh of paint as the pitch is marked out. The clatter of football boots on concrete or the sounds as they are struck together to remove mud. The resonant corridors of the stadium. Football talk at the pub-on the bus-in the cafe. The slam of plastic seats as the crowd stand-craving to see a corner. The conflict between the corporate stadium sound system and the oral culture of the Ultras. The cries of joy and despair. The referee's whistle and the quiet calm-the void-of the stadium after the game, when the crowd has gone.

Paul Whitty
17th May, 2018

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Contents

5	...	Introduction
6–13	...	Laurence Crane <i>The Manor Ground</i>
14–16	...	Juliet Jacques <i>Goalkeeping vs. Bursaphelenchus, 23 February 2018</i>
17–19	...	Darren Lake <i>'We Need Forest': The Ritual of The Talking</i>
20–25	...	Sтивен Matthews GRASSROOTS MATCH-NOTES
28–30	...	Patrick Tubin McGinley <i>36,000 for Mataric: Recorded on the 14th of March, 2004 at White Hart Lane, before a match between Tottenham Hotspur and Newcastle United</i>
31–33	...	Ruth Potts <i>Football</i>
34–35	...	Lauren Redhead <i>Ally</i>
36–40	...	Davide Tidoni <i>Q&A with Paul Whitty</i>
41–43	...	Duncan Whitley <i>From Highfield Road to Parada de Ester</i>
44–47	...	Paul Whitty <i>Elland Road, LS11 0ES</i>
48	...	Davide Tidoni THE STADIUM AS I WANT IT
49	...	Ouro

David Tidoni

Q&A with Paul Whitty

Q: (Paul Whitty)

The oral grassroots sound-culture of Ultras like Brescia 1911 seems at odds with the way that football clubs want to present themselves and their sounding environment. How have the clubs tried to impose their own sound-culture on matchdays?

A: (Davide Tidoni)

I have no experience with big clubs. My experience is mainly related to second division Ultras groups. Perhaps my observations could be extended to other cities but I don't feel comfortable talking about groups I have no direct experience with. For this reason I would prefer to focus my response on what's happening in Brescia and particularly the group Brescia 1911.

The stadium's auditory environment is mainly controlled by the state and police force and not directly by the club itself. The club passively accepts orders and regulations coming from above as the primary aim of the club is to maximize sports commercialisation and fan consumerism.

The club's range of actions within the sounding environment of the stadium is more related to radio music and commercial advertisements played back before and after the game as well as during intermissions. If compared to other European stadiums where you have sound effects in combination with actions on the pitch, direct amplification from the pitch, etc.—this is not an extreme situation but still interesting to discuss as it shares the same vision of the future-generation stadium model.

To put it briefly, broadcast music and advertisements are designed to psychologically displace fans from their active role as engaged performers.

Ultras don't go to the stadium to listen to advertisements but to perform.

They participate and use the stadium as a space where they can express themselves. Music today is played back in every commercial space but in a football stadium, where the social dimension is so strong, music works as a domestication strategy and expropriates the Ultras of their own social space.

I have an example about this; I remember an away match in 2008 where the 1911 arrived quite early before the game and positioned themselves inside the stadium. Local fans were already on their stand and members of the 1911 started provoking them. The locals responded and began an extemporary battle where the groups tested each other creating/adapting/choosing chants best suited for the situation. At a certain point, in order to quiet the battle, somebody from the stadium turned on the local radio played through the main PA system so that the groups had to stop competing as they could not hear each other anymore.

Another example is from a match I saw in 2012 in Florence where they used 'Enter Sandman' from Metallica as the kick-off song intended to create some kind of spectacle atmosphere and shared enthusiasm. So pathetic... they tried to trigger excitement and emotional tension within the crowd by playing back a song that filled out the whole space and alienated people, excluding them from participating. Nobody from the public would ever choose to sing 'Enter Sandman'. The playback of that song shifted the context of the environment into a fictional framework detached from the actual conditions of the situation. This model is a top-down strategy developed with the purpose of creating consensus and manipulating sentiment. The audience is distanced from the real and their participation is reduced to a shallow cultural consumerism void of their own unique forms of input and collaboration.

Q:

How have Ultras adapted to legislation that banned drums and megaphones from stadia in 2007 and to other security measures?

They were forced to adapt. Since 2007 there has been an increased expansion of repressive measures on football grounds. I say repressive because they were ostensibly designed to ensure safety and quality standards and their real aim was to limit supporters' activities and their potential growth. Here are the main limitations and the way they changed Ultras' ways of organising sound.

1) Drums and megaphone ban—without megaphone and PA system it's very difficult to coordinate large groups of fans as well as stimulate and influence the general public. The lack of drums means absence of a clear reference beat. This situation weakens the unity of the group and the capacity to keep the tempo and sing together on the same beat. As a consequence of this instability, chants increased speed, some of them even doubled their original tempo and turned into a condensed structure quite difficult to sing aloud. Some chants changed speed so drastically that when the Ultras sing them with the drums outside the stadium they are completely lost and can't figure out what's wrong between voices and drums.

2) Banners and choreographies ban—only banners and choreographies that are approved by the police are allowed inside the stadium. This means the police force has the power to examine and censor how the groups choose to exhibit their support. This ban is not only limiting freedom of speech but also reduces unique forms of expression. When exhibited within the stadium, choreographies and banners need to be coordinated in advance. By banning those activities you suppress people's initiative to organize themselves collectively. You change their position from actually doing something and being useful to the group to "unemployed" and displaced from their roles as contributors to the game.

3) Tessera del tifoso (fan ID card)—another exercise in state control that arrived on the scene in 2010-2011. According to this measure, supporters who haven't subscribed to the Tessera can't buy tickets for away matches. Try to understand what it means for a group to not attend away matches...

It means to lose spirit and stop sharing time that was usually the occasion for creating new chants. In this way the chant repertoire stops flowing. In addition to this you can imagine that if a group can't attend away matches, it means that local supporters will find themselves alone at the stadium without an opportunity to sing against the visitors and compete with them.

4) Daspo—banning order issued by the police, not magistrates. Daspo has become an instrumental strategy for controlling certain groups that, compared to others, are more critical towards the club and feel particularly close to socio-political issues. The Daspo has repeatedly been issued to specific persons with the clear aim to remove them from the group and undermine the group's inner structure. When the people who are in charge of starting the chants get a ban it's difficult to find others who can replace them. New leaders need charisma, empathy, communication skills, humility, and the capacity to read and respond to the game. It's always important to share responsibilities amongst the group so that if a particular member gets a ban, the group can reorganise and continue with ease.

Being restricted by controlling measures, both in terms of personal access and means of sound production, supporters begin to perceive the stadium as an obstructive environment to any sense of community. They are seemingly cut off ... with less interaction from the visiting supporters, fewer shared memories amongst the group, fewer connections with the club and the team, and fewer possibilities to actually engage in significant actions that would generate genuine enthusiasm and energy. The overall spirit of the shared space is diminished and the context within which the chants are realised is contracted and stifled.

The measures described above combined with the football club's managerial incompetence make the situation in Brescia quite unhappy. It's unbelievable how the 1911 still attend games and find energy to contest modern football and police repression.

Q:

Will the singing end?

A:

What I see today is a clear attempt to erase the stadium as a space for practicing collective free speech. How the chants will adapt, I am not sure, but the songs are at risk of losing criticality and may begin to reflect dominant cultural agendas designed by the football industry in accordance with the state. The opportunity for the groups to voice their shared subjective existential protest is at risk.

Davide Tidoni is a researcher in the field of sound and listening. He is interested in the relational dimension of listening and the uses of sound in everyday life. With a particular emphasis on observation, action and participation, he has created works that include site-specific interventions, live performances and audio recording projects.