

On the Use of Field Recordings on Radio: A history of the beginnings

JEAN-BAPTISTE MASSON 

Université de Rennes-2, France; Cinémathèque de Bretagne, France
Email: jbmasson@pm.me

This article traces the history of the use and reception of field recordings on radio, in France and Britain, outside the categories considered as art or music such as *hörspiel* or *musique concrète*. It shows that radio producers had diverse reactions to the use of sonic ambiances recorded in the field. There was an opposition between a ‘Pure Sound School’, which promoted the use of field recordings instead of voice to depict the environment where the reporter was, and a school that privileged voice. If the use of recordings of sonic ambiances was not new, their utilisation on radio as elements autonomous in themselves was. They were falling *between* categories: they were not reports (because of the absence of voice), they were not *musique concrète* (because sounds were not modified and were presented within their context, that is, not as sound objects), they were not sound effects (because they lasted several minutes and could be composed through editing), and they were not wildlife recordings (because wildlife could be absent). Sonic ambiances were new sonic objects that took time to digest. This time also represented a listening mutation, and this will be analysed through the beginnings of radio documentaries and the works of sound hunters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sound hunters were sound hobbyists who, from the 1950s, started to form clubs and national and international organisations to produce radio programmes and to organise national and international contests. Such hobbyists were active from the beginning of sound recording technologies, but it was with the advent of tape recorders that the movement grew to a large scale. In France, the movement was well structured thanks to the work of Jean Thévenot (1916–83), a radio producer at French radio. Thévenot notably started the French sound hunting association and was the co-founder of the International Amateur Recording Contest (IARC) in 1952 and of the international organisation *Fédération Internationale des Chasseurs de Son* in 1956 (Masson 2022). He also started a radio programme dedicated to sound hunting in 1948 that lasted until 2002, which has been partially preserved at the Inatèque of the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel in Paris. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, a striking feature of most of their works is the presence of a commentary that explains what is being listened to. Besides music and wildlife recordings,

most of the time, a voice – live or overdubbed – introduced and commented on what was about to be heard. And a remarkable feature of this commentary is that it was often as long as the recording or sound piece itself.

Several reasons can explain the prevalence and duration of these commentaries. First, for a number of sound hunters, sound recording was more the recording of an experience as opposed to the recording of a sound scene. The commentary therefore provided a context, explaining the situation and conveying the sentiments of the recordist. Such recordings, more than a documentary or a report, were like sonic journals that recorded a moment in the life of the recordist, as photographs could do. A live commentary was seen as the proof that this moment had happened in a real life. With the commentary, sounds were no longer presented for themselves but were introduced and ‘staged’. The commentary was a *mise en scène* of sounds and of sound, which were developed within a mediated narrative. This *mise en scène* of sounds was described as a ‘dramaturgy of the real’ by the writer, radio producer and cinema historian Charles Ford: ‘What is the “dramaturgy of the real” when applied to radio? It is, obviously, the dramatization of an authentic, real event. This dramaturgy aims at making the listener understand better the phenomenon presented to him’ (Ford 1969: 97). In that context, technical flaws were also markers of authenticity. This was clearly explained by the sound hunter Denys G. Killick in the June 1960 issue of *Tape Recording*, where he relates his experience of producing a feature from a fair, the climax of which was riding on a surprisingly intense roundabout where his commentary passed from calm to yelling: ‘That particular recording is so good because it is so obviously sincere ... There is no technical formula to achieve a result like that’ (Killick 1960: 15). The distortion brought a degree of sincerity to the recording that could not be replicated in a studio. A similar process has been observed in photography and amateur cinema, where blurred pictures are a characteristic of documentary pictures, a sign that the photography or the film were taken while the event

was happening – signalling its authenticity (Boltanski 1965; Zimmermann 1995).

Another reason to provide a commentary was to explain the source of uncommon sounds when it was thought that the fact of knowing their sources could add to the interest of the recording. The commentary then gave a renewed consideration of these sounds or sound sources. This was the case for underwater sounds, for example, or for the recordings of very faint sounds made by Joseph-Maurice Bourot, a scientist from Poitiers. He presented several pieces for the IARC in 1954 and 1955 in which he was interested in life happening below the threshold of human perception: the activity of a woodpile, the evolution of a chick inside its egg, the sound of a jumping flea, to cite only a few of Bourot's experiments. Bourot explained in the beginning of his piece: 'The recording of very feeble sounds has always amused me . . . The amplification of the soft murmurs that inhabit our life is interesting, because they take a new flavour. They establish themselves; they emerge from the background where the roar of the modern city had put them. Sometimes, it is a real eye-opener [*révélation*].'¹

The originality of Bourot's work was presented directly in the commentary: the recording of very feeble sounds from the everyday, unheard because of their softness and the noisiness of the modern city. However, the mediation of microphones, amplifiers and speakers gave an access to them, and it was thus a usually inaccessible sound world that Bourot brought to the ears of others. The duration of his commentary was often equivalent to the duration of the recording itself. But there was a need to explain what was being heard because of the unfamiliar aspect of the sounds and because of the unfamiliar technique that allowed their recording. The entire success of the work relied, and still relies, on the understanding that the listeners had of what they had listened to. The interest of the piece depended on the recognition of the sound source. Without an explanation, it was nearly impossible to recognise what was being listened to. And the understanding of the sound sources could, and still can, bring fascination: one was listening to a woodpile, to the heartbeats of a chick inside its egg, and one understood how exceptional it was to be able to hear them. Bourot then attached much care to his commentary. In his precision, he was very pedagogical and knew how to make poetry come out.

However, that need of explanation and identification also signifies a possible difficulty in considering the sounds by themselves on an aesthetic level, independently of their sources. In other words, the impossibility of identifying what was listened to was seen as a

¹Joseph-Maurice Bourot, *Un tas de bois . . . vous parle*, 1954, in *Pris sur le vif, une anthologie d'enregistrements d'amateurs français*. This anthology, compiled by Thévenot, won the Prix Italia in 1961.

reduction of the appeal of the recording, or of the sound piece.

2. THE CONTEXT OF A TALKATIVE RADIO

However, this presence of commentaries and detailed description was also part of a larger context. As noted by the historian of radio Robert Prot, post-War radio was talkative: 'producers wanted to present and comment' what they were broadcasting (Prot 2006: 114). Thus, Jean Thévenot, the producer from 1948 of the main sound hunting programmes on French waves, had a commentating time that was almost always equivalent to the duration of the recordings he broadcast. The limitations of technology explains in part this talkative aspect, especially for reports and outdoor recordings.

In the 1920s, reports were made in semi-broadcast. The reporter was on-site and after the event, telephoned his text to a secretary who transcribed it and then gave it to the speaker who read it (Méadel 1992: 95). Soon, though, live broadcasting appeared and reporters were able to express themselves at the microphone. The first radio reports concerned the sports sector, and then expanded to other themes such as official ceremonies. Méadel (1994: 271) dates back to 1926–7 the use of telephone lines in radio reporting, which made it possible to broadcast outside. The reporter Jean Antoine popularised this form of radio with his coverage of the Tour de France and made the microphone a mobile element capable of following the events (Deleu 2013: 71).

In the 1930s, recording trucks, cars and vans started to be used. Sound was recorded on disc recorders. Reporters could be outside the truck but were still dependent on a cable linking their microphone to the truck (Talbot 1973; Turner, Barredo and Grattan 2018). This allowed the multiplication of 'actuality recordings'. These were reports that stressed the factual and emphasised the ordinary life of the masses, with a particular concern about social conditions during the depression years of the 1930s (Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 142). When these reports were first produced, journalists had to describe in words the scenes they had witnessed when back in the studio. Few on-site sounds could be recorded. In Britain, according to Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, the first British radio feature using 'actuality sound recordings' taken on location was produced in the summer of 1934 by Lawrence Gilliam, who hired a recording van from a film company (*ibid.*: 146–7).

In France, the 26 April 1936 issue of *Radio Magazine* described the trip of the radio-reporting bus of the *L'Intransigeant* French newspaper in London. The reporter Michel Ferry 'took advantage

of the opportunity to glaze over the most suggestive sound sketches of the English capital'. The objective was 'to make us aware of the words and feelings of people who are new to us, rather than that of a reporter who "listens to himself speak"'. Thus, were recorded and broadcast 'the streets of the city, the changing of the guard at Buckingham Castle, the prayers of St. Paul's, the popular hymns in the squares, the newspaper criers shouting sensational headlines, the unemployed playing music in the street'. In total, there was one hour of lively recordings, interspersed with interviews taken on the spot, and 'a skilful montage reinforced the evocative character of this radio panorama' (Domene 1936: 3).

However, these kinds of programmes where ambient sounds took the foreground were the exception. Recording vehicles were not numerous, and the weakness of audio equipment contributed to a specific way of doing radio, with the use of a retrospective voice, recorded in the studio, or with the reporter describing what they were witnessing. This lack, or even absence, of outdoor and ambience sounds was noted and criticised by listeners. Thus, in 1946, the radio producer Jean Guignebert replied to a listener who reproached a radio-reporter for having 'limited his intervention in front of the microphone to a monologue' without sound elements. To explain this, Guignebert established a distinction between radio reporting and sonic radio reporting, in which a sonic ambience was present (Guignebert 1946: 3). The year after, Jacques Peuchmaurd, who directed the documentary unit of the Club d'Essai, detailed this distinction and established it as being the difference between 'documentary' and 'report':

Documentary and report must be clearly differentiated, just as they are in film. In reportage, considered as a definite genre, the role of the reporter is predominant. He speaks against the background sound that the microphone ear records, describes the setting, comments on the events, and only rarely gives way to the raw sound element. He is not only the ear, but the eye. He is the actor, the creator. In the documentary, on the other hand, the reporter disappears. He is no more than a man holding a microphone: a mute man. Here, the microphone is everything. Just as the camera only takes images, the microphone only takes sounds, raw sounds, without comment. It is only afterwards, in the studio editing, that the word intervenes, as it appears above the images in the film documentary. (Peuchmaurd 1947: 58)

This distinction was not limited to radio, as highlighted ten years after by Claude Huchin, but was also present in the commercial discs edited during the 1950s. There was a 'pure document' tendency facing another one that privileged the use of a commentary (Huchin 1957: np).

3. THE PURE SOUND SCHOOL

That movement of producing features on radio based solely on sound, without a voice, or with a voice reduced to its minimum, was the direction chosen by 'the Pure Sound School', as the BBC reporter René Cutforth called it in 1959 in the sound-hunting magazine *Tape Recorder* (Cutforth 1959: 9). Cutforth was a famous radio reporter who gained his fame from the war reports he produced during the war in Korea. In his reports, the description was carried out by the voice, with sounds recorded in the field being illustrative only. For him, the absence of a commentary was seen as a reduction in the experience that was passed on (ibid.: 9–10). However, he witnessed the birth of another way of doing radio:

The very newest school of thought in Radio is a school which talks about 'Pure Sound', and 'Pure Radio', and has the idea that you could make a feature out of sounds alone, strung together with almost no speech at all. (Ibid.: 9)

Cutforth did not mention a specific programme, but he was probably referring to *Radio Ballad*, a series by Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Charles Parker, the first episode of which was broadcasted the year before in 1958. The main characteristic of the *Radio Ballad* series was the absence of a narrator. The story unfolded in these documentaries was built through the editing of interviews (where the voice of the journalist is not present), field recordings and traditional folk songs. In line with actuality recordings, the *Radio Ballad* series had a social, sometimes even political, tone, and aimed to make ordinary people extraordinary (Howkins 2000).

Such documentaries relying exclusively on sounds recorded in the field to build their narrative were not new but were only starting to reach a bigger audience. Twelve years before, in 1946, Jacques Peuchmaurd produced *Paris-Brest* for the Club d'Essai, in which he recorded the sound of an electrical engine train and of a steam engine train on the Paris–Brest line. Ambient sounds on the platform were also recorded. This was done thanks to a disc-recorder that was 'suspended by ropes and rubber bands to the luggage rack in order to suppress the jolts of the trip' (Peuchmaurd 1946: 2). He wanted 'to make a radio documentary conceived in exactly the same way as a film documentary ... A documentary, not a reportage. A microphone that takes sounds like a camera takes views: no need for a reporter' (ibid.: 2). The year after, Peuchmaurd, with the help of Henri-François Rey, proposed another sonic documentary, which was broadcast on 15 April 1947 in the programme *Notre temps* (Our Time). This 14-minute 'documentary essay' aimed to describe in sound a worker's workplace. Machines and factory noises were the main elements that could be heard, with some comments by a voice-over. The worker himself was almost absent (Deleu 2013: 48).

That same year, the French international correspondent and radio producer Samy Simon wrote an article that detailed the future 'Pure Sound School'. Simon stated that one has to search for 'sound elements that carry their own eloquence' in order to 'give them predominance' over a voiced description. He claimed that, in the absence of speech, rhythm and variation of sound are important to sustain a discourse made in sound. However, one should take care to not 'oversaturate' the ear. A whistling train in the countryside was, he noted, highly evocative, 'but after one minute, there are no more fields nor cows, nor river, nor bell tower. There is just a noise reduced to itself, which has delivered its message, given its flesh, like an empty envelope.' To prevent this, rhythm and dynamism were, he argued, the key attributes. 'Sound illustrations should live by themselves' in all their colours and movements, to deliver their messages. Simon concluded, 'the best documentary, on radio, is certainly the one which speaks least, and it is why we, whose job is to speak in front of a microphone, still have so much room for improvement' (Simon 1947: 54–6).

Thus, in direct relationship with the use of sound on radio, Simon supports the idea that sounds alone are able to carry meaning. In this, not all sounds are equivalent, as each has a distinctive imaginary power attached to it: a footstep can say a lot about the person walking, about the scene that is happening and its ambience. This is what Simon said, when he spoke about the 'eloquence' of sound elements that can 'deliver their messages'. Such a posture was echoed in the work and writings of the documentary filmmaker John Grierson, who wrote in 1930 that 'there must be a poetry of sound which none of us knows . . . Meaning in footsteps, voices in trees, and woods of the day and night everywhere' (Cox 2017: 175). That 'meaning' is not only referential (about the origin of the sound), but also contextual (about what is around that sound, its context and atmosphere – for example, is the sound close or far, soft or loud, dry or reverberated, accompanied by other sounds or not). The meaning mentioned by Grierson occurs when both referential and contextual elements are present: I am hearing the footsteps of a woman walking (I identify high heel, the rhythm is a walking one) in a vast stony hall (I identify the sound of footsteps on stone and there is a lot of reverberation) under the rain (I hear rain). It is mainly through the contextual information that imagination can unfold. It is thanks to this imagination and meaning that sounds convey that the construction of a sonic discourse became possible. And because there is a discourse, there is, for Simon, the necessity of managing the listener's attention. The problem of duration is the crux of this necessity to manage attention. For Simon, long durations with similar sonic elements should be prohibited, as he thought they saturated the ear and lost

meaning through time. There is thus an almost musical discourse to organise in order to manage the listener's attention and deliver the intended message.

To help us understand the possible ways to elaborate a musical discourse from sounds, the composer and electroacoustic music theoretician Simon Emmerson has developed a useful classification. Emmerson came up with a classification with 'aural discourse', composed of musical objects free of associations, that is, they do not reference the real world. Against this type of discourse, Emmerson proposed a 'mimetic discourse', based on the use of sounds from the environment (natural or human-made). Between these two poles, Emmerson added a category for works using a mix between them. To these 'aural discourse' and 'mimetic discourse', Emmerson added three musical syntaxes: an 'abstract syntax', derived from models or ideas with no apparent musical origin; an 'abstracted syntax', which has its source in the sound material itself; and a syntax that is a combination of the previous two (Emmerson 1986: 17–24).

Following Emmerson, Grierson, Peuchmaurd and Simon were working, or envisioning, a 'mimetic discourse' with an 'abstracted syntax'. They were facing the challenge of organizing a storytelling with sounds alone, without a voice guiding the listener. Sound hunters were also dealing with these challenges, and their work allowed for the tracing of how radio producers reacted to such mimetic discourse and abstracted syntax. A revealing example was given during the 1959 edition of the IARC, organised in London. French sound enthusiast Jean-Claude Hénin, a cartographer from Paris, composed a 'montage without words', a composition of recordings that he used to evoke the different periods of life, from womb to tomb. The paratext was not recorded but written on an accompanying note. The editing and technical quality of the piece was praised, and the composition was seen as 'real sound, without waffle'. However, its abstract quality was considered difficult without a preliminary reading of the note: 'an instruction book is needed', wrote a member of the jury; while another one was more telling about the radiogenic concept, '[the piece gives] the impression of a film soundtrack. Images are missing. Original, but *not very radiophonic* 14/20.'² The use of this word of 'radiophonic' encompasses the crux of what was necessary for Thévenot: voice. For him, radio was thought primarily as a medium articulated by voice, for voice. That means that Thévenot spoke a lot in his programme, to introduce each recording and to link them to a human

²Jean-Claude Hénin, *L'existence*, information sheet and jury notes. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/20, folder 8ème CIMES, 1959, Londres, subfolder Fiches d'enregistrements et scripts français et étrangers utilisés dans *Aux Quatre Vents*. Thévenot's comment was harsher: 'Quite naive but well made, good sound. One should not take it as a philosophical essay, but as an editing. 12/20.' The stress is mine.

endeavour. The comparison between Hénin's sonic piece and *Une journée en France*, a compilation of amateur sound recordings rearranged in a narrative by Thévenot and his collaborator Jacques Landrieux and broadcast in 1951 is illuminating. While the concept is similar – a temporal compression to sonically express in a reduced time a life (Hénin) or a day (Thévenot and Landrieux) – the treatment is quite opposite: an unsegmented sonic piece without words for Hénin against a collection of 15 recordings made by sound hunters around France gathered in a 16-page script for Thévenot and Landrieux.³ Of course, the duration of the two pieces was different. Hénin was limited to 15 minutes as he submitted his piece in the 'editing' category of the IARC, while Thévenot and Landrieux had one hour. But in the end, Thévenot's speaking time was equivalent to the duration of the broadcast recordings and each of the recordings was introduced and commented on before its airing. In other words, Thévenot never let a sonic piece unfold by itself, he never let the recordings speak for themselves.

One could wonder that maybe Thévenot had difficulties in appreciating the 'mimetic discourse' and 'abstracted syntax' of a sonic piece. But he was the co-founder of a sound effects company in the early 1950s, the Agence Générale d'Enregistrement Sonore – Memnon (Sound Recording General Agency – Memnon) and was trained to appreciate sound and the imaginary that it had the potential to convey. Looking at a review of sound effects records that he wrote in *Arts et Techniques Sonores*, Thévenot was able to have a precise judgement regarding the evocative power of a sound scene. The discs, a church bells recording and the recording of the ambience of a popular meeting, were assessed on the technical level, the authenticity of the scene and their capacity to foster imagination (Thévenot 1952: 7–8).

A bigger picture emerges here. People, at least within the tradition of radio broadcasting, faced difficulties when approaching these works because they were challenging for them to classify: they were not reports (because of the absence of voice), they were not *musique concrète* (because sounds were not modified and were presented within their context, that is, not as sound objects), they were not sound effects (because they lasted several minutes and were composed), and they were not wildlife recordings (because of the absence of wildlife). In regard of Emerson's classification, Thévenot and Cutforth had difficulties in apprehending an 'abstracted syntax' based on everyday sounds. These represented new sonic objects, conveying a sonic sensibility in formation that took time to digest. Or more precisely, they

represented a sensibility in formation in relation to radio, which was seen, primarily, as a medium for conveying the human voice, articulated around the voice. That aspect was not new. As the radio historians Shawn VanCour and Andrew Crisell have shown, already in the early days of radio drama in the 1920s, voice and speech were affirmed as a source of narrative information that should be privileged. On the other hand, the use of sound effects (and music) should be based 'on a principle of sonic parsimony' with a limited number of sonic inputs (VanCour 2018: 124). 'Context is the key to the meaning of the sounds . . . and the means by which context is established is at bottom *verbal*' (Crisell [1986] 1994: 53).

The Pure Sound School and a number of sound hunters took the opposite way, establishing and developing context and meaning through sounds alone. These sounds – of objects, of beings, of the elements, of the weather – were, as the science and technology philosopher Don Ihde has described them, 'wordless voices' (Ihde [1976] 2007: 154). As Ihde continues, 'the voice of each thing bespeaks something of its *per-sona*' (ibid.). Human voices, 'voiced words' (ibid.: 150), could be present, but they did not take the forefront, and the storytelling could be done with 'wordless voices' alone. That way, Pure Sound School producers and sound hunters let sounds have their own characters – characters in the meaning of special qualities, but also in the meaning of personages within a narrative. That view, where theatre comes along with sound, is present in Ihde's work on listening. Ihde uses the spelling '*per-sona*' where the two parts of the Latin word *persona* are linked with a hyphen to better express the relation between *persona*, 'mask' (the mask used by actors in ancient theatre), and *per-sona*, 'by sound' (ibid.: 14). Following this idea, the mask of things expresses itself by sound, and sound is the mask through which things express themselves in wordless voices.

Thus, the Pure Sound School and sound hunters were seeking not only a theatre of voiced words, but also of wordless voices. This required the abandonment of the central figure of the speaker, who was the one dictating the storytelling, who was the character taking the foreground to drive the narrative in a specific direction. One could see this not as storytelling, but as 'stollentelling',⁴ as sounds offer a multiplicity of meanings and directions – if one is able to listen to 'signs' (sounds with enriched meanings) beyond mere 'signals' (sounds that indicate warning or position) (Schaeffer [1967] 1998). This was expressed by a sound hunter at the first British Amateur Tape Recording Contest in 1957. As one of the judges said, the piece (unnamed, as the sound hunter) was 'an

³ *Une journée en France ou Une journée d'hiver en France*, first version of the script. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/16, folder Émission 'Une journée en France' 1950–1, subfolder Texte préparatoire.

⁴ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this link with theatre and Joyce.

ambitious range of material ... His interest in sound for its own sake was present all the time, particularly in the sequence which compared the song of the lark with the scream of jet aircraft' (Gibson 1957: 21). This competitor was able to perceive specific qualities – such as texture, rhythm, harmony, movement, or timbre – in these sounds, qualities that lay beyond, or more probably below, their significations. And it was through these qualities that they arranged the song of a lark with the scream of a jet aircraft in a coherent sonic sequence, in a theatre of wordless voices.

On another level, the resistance against the 'Pure Sound School' was also a question of labour. To have a reporter in the field able to broadcast their impressions and comments reconfigured radio labour's organisation. Three persons were involved before: the reporter on the field who telephoned their text to a secretary, who transcribed it and handed the paper to a speaker. When the possibility appeared to have a live recording and broadcast from the field, the reporter started to be accompanied by several technicians, and it was now the reporter's voice that was directly heard, the text was no longer telephoned to a secretary. Then, when portable battery-powered recorders allowed the reporter to directly record, it was the technicians who were impacted. The beginnings of the use of field recordings on radio has therefore a context that goes beyond a peculiar sensibility to sound.

4. BROADCASTING VALUE AND RADIOGENY

Sound hunting's contests provide a way to study the evolution of this sensibility, and of the critics that radio producers raised against sound hunters who privileged sound versus voice. Indeed, in the notation sheets of the international and French contests, the recordings had to be judged according to two notes: a technical one, and a 'broadcasting value' (*valeur antenne*) one. The final note was the mean of these two. The Thévenot archive, one of the richest sources to document sound hunting (Masson 2022), does not give precision about the meaning of this broadcasting value. But one has to remember that the international contest was founded by two radio producers – Jean Thévenot in France and René Monnat in Switzerland – who intended to use the recordings within their programmes. To better understand the meaning of this broadcasting value, the concept of radiogeny is useful. The radio historian Kate Lacey describes radiogeny as 'those aspects that are only evident in the recording and broadcasting of sound and that reveal or express an encounter with some sort of truth' (Lacey 2013: 93). That notion of 'truth' was paramount for Thévenot, as a token of authenticity. It defined for him the importance of 'live recording' for capturing voices

'in the real' (Thévenot 2009: 156), as a way to reveal one to oneself and to the others. The ability of a recording to grasp the core of a person, of an event, of a place, of an epoch, of beings was what defined its radiogeny and therefore its broadcasting value.

In this context, for a number of sound hunters and radio producers, such as Thévenot and Cutforth, sound was conceptualised as the carrier of an experience, and not as the end of the recording. This is very clear with Thévenot, who, despite being one of the most active promoters of sound hunting, did not push forward features that were devoid of commentary. For him, as for Cutforth, sound was the carrier or an element of a narrative that had to be, before anything else, carried by voice. Beyond sound, that narrative was at the heart of his idea of what was radiogenic, and that narrative had to be conducted by voice – the essential instrument to convey an experience. And the more palpable the experience, the more radiogenic the recording, the more highly viewed was the recording by Thévenot. This explains why Thévenot was fond of snapshots, and why he tried to push sound hunters to produce them, because snapshots were viewed as the direct recording of an experience. Within that experience, sound was only a part, a vector to convey it. Sound was considered for its capacity to illustrate experiences, and its quality was almost seen as secondary. This explains why he accepted and broadcast recordings that could be of crude technical quality, and rejected recordings of good technical quality but from which he could not reconstruct a story.

This is clearly stated in, for instance, the notation sheet of *La circulation à Paris* (Traffic in Paris), a recording made by Stefan Kudelski for the 1952 IARC. The recording was made with an early prototype of the Nagra I, allowing Kudelski to perform a 6-minute field recording while walking in the streets and the Paris underground. Such an independence from the mains was new for the time and impressed Thévenot, who described the recording as being a 'sensational sound scene'. However, despite the novelty and spectacular aspect of the recording, Thévenot could not reconstruct any narrative from it. Despite being 'sensational', the sound scene remained for him a banal one. He could not see any interest, or any point, in sharing it on air. He consequently gave it a broadcasting value note of only 6 out of 20.⁵

The broadcasting value was also linked to the common or uncommon aspect of the sounds present in the recording. Thus, a sonic ambience recorded in a Tuareg camp in the desert by Henry Brandt, a photographer from Valangin, gathered a very good 'broadcast value' and won the first prize in the

⁵Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/18, folder 1er CIMES – 1952, subfolder Émission spéciale (31.05.52).

‘Snapshot’ category in the 1954 IARC.⁶ As noted by Brandt in his application, his piece was an unedited recording made during an evening in the camp. Camels call to their calves while being brought back to the camp, a dog barks from time to time, all this shrouded in the singing of cicadas. All elements that, due to their unfamiliarity, were thought to be able to grasp the imagination of the listener. However, as Thévenot wrote in a book dedicated to exploration cinema, ‘the same work can appear either banal or extraordinary whether it is showed in its country of origin or abroad’ (Liotard, Samivel and Thévenot 1950: 23). And indeed, a few years after Brandt’s recording, in 1961, a snapshot of a herd in the French countryside was submitted by the sound hunter Michel Pellissier, under the title *L’arrivée du troupeau* (Arrival of the herd). As the title indicates, the piece is the recording of a herd, with mooing, cries, bells, a car passing and other sounds of the countryside. But in the notation sheet, Thévenot wondered: ‘Good sound take, but what could be done with it?’ Despite that the recording was a French equivalent to Brandt’s recording, its common elements did not fit Thévenot’s idea of what was radiogenic and therefore broadcastable. ‘Good element for a sound effect library’ was his final comment, with no note given.⁷

The influence of these radiogenic rules was felt by a number of participants. Thus, Arne Juul Jacobsen, a Swedish sound hunter who participated in the ninth edition of the IARC organised in Amsterdam in 1960, carped these undefined rules. For him, sound hunters had to find new ways of expressing themselves in sound, ways that were not offered by radio. But he soon discovered that ‘the jury uses radio as scale’. For him, even the different categories of the contest showed that it was created by people from the radio, for the radio. Hence, while for Jacobsen the prizes should be given to people who brought novelty, he thought that they were given to those who replicated models elaborated by existing radio programmes:

It seems that an essential aspect is forgotten: the sound hunters who seriously use their recording equipment as instrument, who experiment and try to build something new, searching new expressions, new methods and new ways of doing – new compositions – a new style. (Jacobsen 1961: 7, stress in original)

⁶Henry Brandt, *Ambiance du soir dans un campement de Touaregs au Niger*. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/18, folder 3^{ème} CIMES – 1954, siège: Bruxelles, subfolder Notations et observations.

⁷Bande 44D, Michel Pellissier, *L’arrivée du troupeau*. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/21, folder 10^{ème} CIMES – 1961, Berlin, subfolder Documents préparatoires – dont manuscrits – concernant l’émission spéciale du 30-11-61 diffusée sur France II et l’émission du 23-12-61 diffusée sur France IV, sub-subfolder Fiches et scripts utilisés dans les émissions (dont documents manuscrits).

However, the jury of the IARC 1960 was not after this, and the winning tapes, for Jacobsen, were more ‘radio for the amateurs’ than something else. In Jacobsen’s opinion, despite the quality of the proposals, they were not fulfilling the potential of sound hunting, because of the influence of radiogeny (ibid.). Sound hobbyists had to follow certain unnamed rules if they wanted to have their recordings or pieces broadcast – and well-marked in contests, as the International Amateur Recording Contest was organised within a radio context until the end of the 1960s (Masson 2022). Thus, original recordings that could have brought something new, could be rejected, or completely recontextualised when broadcast, as Thévenot and Landrieux edited the recordings most of the time, tailoring them for a use on radio, a use that followed their radiogenic principles.

This is in blunt contradiction with the so-called sound hunters’ liberty that was heralded by Thévenot and by sound hunters themselves. In many instances, Thévenot praised the liberty that sound hunters had, thanks to the fact that they were amateurs. They were able to freely choose their subject, the manner in which to treat it, and the time spent on their work. That freedom was for him one of the elements that distinguished sound hunters from radio professionals (Thévenot 1960: 5). Sound hunters such as Peter Handford and Marcel Cellier, who were renowned for their work – train recordings for Handford, folkloric music from East Europa for Cellier – had the same arguments. As Cellier said, ‘this is maybe the most joyful aspect [of being a sound hunter], we are free and do what pleases us, what we want to do’.⁸ While for Handford, ‘The amateur has an enormous advantage as having no customer to worry about he can experiment at will until he achieves a personally satisfying result’ (Handford 1980: 125). Handford continues: ‘The best way to learn what can and cannot be done is to experiment, but such opportunities are often denied to professionals since experiments can take time and cost money, expenditures of which customers often begrudge’ (ibid.).

However, to be highlighted by prizes during sound hunting contests and by broadcast within sound hunting radio programmes, it appears that this very liberty needed to be expressed in specific ways, and was restricted when sound hunters ventured in unchartered sonic territories. As we have seen, only pieces that followed a specific radiogeny, in which voice had a central place, were recognised. For recordings that sought originality, more than the content, it was the presentation of that content that mattered. And for people like Thévenot, this

⁸Marcel Cellier interviewed by Jean Thévenot, Du laboratoire au violon d’Ingres, *France Culture*, 5 December 1970.

presentation had to be done by voice. Highly original pieces, such the ones of Joseph-Maurice Bourot, succeeded because Bourot took much care in his commentaries. And others, like the ‘cinema for the ear’ piece of Jean-Claude Hénin, were rejected because of the absence of a voiced presentation – the paratext of Hénin was written on an accompanying note, not sound recorded.

Another reason for the apparent limitation of sound hunters’ creativity was the strict policing that Thévenot operated between sound hunting and other sonic contemporaneous developments. He wanted to establish sound hunting as a genre in itself, and to clearly distinguish it from another genre also based on sound recording and that appeared at the same time: *musique concrète*. Thévenot knew Pierre Schaeffer from the war, and the two were neighbours at the Club d’Essai (Masson 2022). Thévenot was very aware of the last development of *musique concrète* and electronic music, as he produced a programme, among others, called *Sounds from Tomorrow or Elsewhere* (*Sons de demain ou d’ailleurs*) for Radio Lausanne in 1957. The programme was created in collaboration with Abraham André Moles, a pioneering scientist in information studies who closely worked with Pierre Schaeffer to write a chapter of *À la recherche d’une musique concrète* and participated in the *Traité des objets musicaux*. The programme sought to present a panorama of all the modern ways to process sound electronically, illustrated by musical pieces. Thus, Thévenot’s choice to not associate sound hunting to these musical developments was deliberate and not related with a disinterest. This is clearly expressed in his correspondence with Roger-Pierre Lafosse, a sound hunter from Bordeaux who wrote to Thévenot in 1963 in order to join the Association Française des Chasseurs de Son (AFCS; Sound Hunters French Association) with his own association, the Groupe d’Arts et Recherches Contemporaines (Contemporary Arts and Research Group). Exchanging with the president of the AFCS, Thévenot wrote that ‘the only drawback, I think, would be to look very “*Service de la recherche*”’.⁹ The Service de la recherche (Research Department) was the department set up by Schaeffer in 1960 to work on *musique concrète* at French Radio. Thévenot did not want to have a *musique concrète* aesthetic associated with the sound-hunting French association. *Musique concrète* was the domain of the Service de la recherche, the other uses of sound recording were the domain of sound hunting. Therefore, Thévenot and the AFCS did not accept Lafosse’s *Groupe d’Arts et Recherches*

Contemporaines, despite the opportunity to have a local branch in Bordeaux. Consequently, southwest France remained without a local sound-hunting section during the following years.

It is thus possible that, for Thévenot, the absence of voice tended to put the work in a category related to *musique concrète*. This is coherent with what Thévenot found inspiring in sound hunting, and what he repeatedly put forward: snapshots, historical recordings, human documents – thus a practice linked to journalism and documentary, close to his own work at French radio and television. This is reflected in the anthology that he presented for the Prix Italia in 1961. Despite the fact that a *musique concrète* piece won the Grand Prix at the International Amateur Recording Contest in 1956 and that electronic music pieces had been broadcast and selected for the IARC, *musique concrète*, electronic music and sonic ambiances are nowhere to be found in his selection. And it is Thévenot’s voice that introduces and describes each recording.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has followed the development of the use of sound independent of voice on radio. This represented a new sensibility, and both radio professionals and sound hunters participated in its diffusion, with diverse and opposite reactions. More accurately, this was not a ‘new’ sensibility, as Geoffrey Cox has shown that such a use of sound was already present in documentary film (Cox 2017). This was more the sign that the use of sound as an aestheticised element was percolating through society. Some conventions of how to make radio were shaken up. For radio producers, the acceptance to rely only on sounds took time and is traceable through the opposition of the two radio-documentary schools that I presented. Sound hunters, because they were also using sound recorders, experienced it at the same time as radio-documentary makers and radio producers. Sound-hunting contests and radio programmes, through the comments of their organisers and producers, allow us to follow the evolution of the acceptance in radio programmes of sound pieces devoid of voice. A vocal commentary was often seen as necessary in the beginning and is characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, radio was the main channel for the diffusion of sound hunters’ recordings, notably following contests. But when one listens to the IARC discs of the 1980s and 1990s, commentaries have nearly disappeared. If there is a paratext, it is textual, and not audio. At that time, the contest has emancipated from radio, which support the idea that the presence of a voiced commentary was effectively due to the influence of radio.

Even in avant-garde music, the aestheticisation of environmental sounds took time. Thus, the composer Hugh Davies neither considered field recordings

⁹Letter from Thévenot to Jean-Marie Grénier, 25 October 1963. Archives JT et CdS, 19910681/2, folder Dossier Association Française des Chasseurs de Son, 1963–9, subfolder Correspondance avec la province (1963–9).

of ambient sounds as ‘works’ in his *Répertoire International des Musiques Électroacoustiques*, because they ‘do not really come under the heading of musical compositions’ (Davis 1968: iv). Pierre Schaeffer also sought to remove any anecdotal nature of sound, seeing it as ‘antimusical’ (Schaeffer 1952: 20). John Cage was an exception, with a blurring of noise, music and sound into one category (Cage 1961). This blurring allowed the same level of interest to be given to noise, sound and music, without projecting preconceived ideas or feelings onto what was listened to. As soon as the beginning of the 1950s, this was the way chosen by some sound hunters, such as Jean-Claude Hénin, Michel Pellissier, Henry Brandt, to name only the ones mentioned in this article. As such, sound hunting, as the Pure Sound School, can be seen as precursors of field recording. And radio, in both France and Britain, was one the main channels for their diffusion.

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