

GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES

A Comprovised- Sonic Piece for solo modified-[amplified] cello:

A displacement, imagery, and unlearning paradigm

By Sergio Castrillón.
(February 2022)

Introduction

For the sake of The Contextual and The *Indisciplinary*

Dear reader:

This text is part of a series called *Experimental and reflective writings*—articles, essays, poems, sonic and graphic-music scores, among others—, where the philosophical, the formal, the poetic, the conceptual, the political, and the colloquial meet and converge. Hence, another example of Displacement!



In fact, this text can also be performed in any way and form. Being the text itself, its own score.

Note: At the end of the text there is a link to watch the premier of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*. So, you can also watch the performance and read the text after, or vice versa, or decide not to read the text at all!

Nor to watch the film!

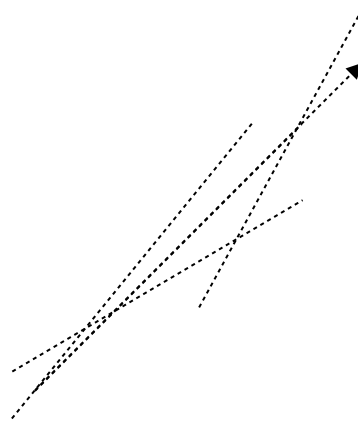
▼ In any case, apart from expounding on the genesis of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*, firstly, this text intends to introduce what I would call: “Soundscape Displacement” and “Displacing Soundscape”. Secondly, I show the appliance of Mental Imagery in this performance. Thirdly, I explain how the axis Displacement/Unlearning is used as a metaphor for my modified-[amplified] cello. The last part of the text displays some conclusions and reflections that I hope will serve as primal material for further

development. As a matter of fact, this text is only the introduction to what could be a more extensive art research project in the future.

A parenthesis, an anecdote

A coincidental encounter with the group *Phd in One Night Collective* in 2016 in Helsinki, who presented me for the first time *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and a collaborative live performance in 2018 in Tallinn with improviser-researcher-educator Jaak Sikk, who invited me to pop up on stage without having played a single sound on my instrument for a month, are the two cornerstones of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*.

In 2017, the *Phd in One Night Collective*, commanded by Ivana Momčilović, introduced me to the notions of landscape, unlearning, and displacement by Jacques Rancière. By that time Jaak Sikk started to unfold his idea of *Mental Imagery on the Process of Improvising Freely*. At that point, I realised that my whole artistic identity and even my life, had been connected to and shaped into those ideas. Namely, I cannot say that these encounters, which became strong friendships and professional partnerships, showed me “the path”; they rather helped me understand “my paths” better.



“Soundscape Displacement” and “Displacing Soundscape”

In *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*, as its title indicates, I strive for representing sonically my Transcultural identity, expanding the Rancièrian view on Landscape. In his text *Politics of the Landscape*, Jacques Rancière

talks about how beings are connected to things in a perceptible scenario and in their way of feeling. That inspired me to think about how I am connected sonically to the landscapes that have formed my Transcultural identity, and how those have been changing and taking different places in my life.

I was born in a small city in the Colombian Andes to a Colombian family with native South American, African, and European heritage. I have lived in Argentina, France, Sweden, and ten years ago I found my new home, Finland. Namely, besides being a Global individual by birth, somehow, I have been into a constant process of “Soundscape Displacement”. I came across this term after systematically analysing and creating a sort of sound memory archive collected in 40 years of life across all those territories.



The archive contains several languages, its different intonations, diverse music genres, nature and city noises, bird trills, the sounds of the wind; since it sounded different everywhere; human singing and shouting, and human and nature quietness, to name but a few. This archive contains the core sonic material for *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*.

After coming across the idea of “Soundscape Displacement” it was natural to decide that every time this performance occurs, it must be in a different space or landscape, to create a sort of “Constant Soundscape Displacement”. It is to say, to generate not only the Soundscape Displacement phenomenon in the soundscape that surrounds me but also in the performance itself.

On the other hand, once the core sonic material of the piece was collected, and while dealing with performative space issues, I had to confront Soundscape composition. This is a form of electroacoustic music that mainly features pre-recorded environmental sounds in specific spaces and contexts. In this case, my medium — a solo modified cello that can be amplified — became the vehicle to interpret acoustically or with amplification the Soundscapes from my sonic memory archive. So, featuring still environmental sounds from specific spaces and

contexts but interpreting them in situ by an acoustic-amplified instrument, the pre-recorded process of Soundscape composition is displaced. Hence, a “Displacing Soundscape” phenomenon occurs.

Mental Imagery

Mental Imagery was the main process used to improvise this performance. In his doctoral thesis, *The Influence of Stimulus Induced Mental Imagery on the Process of Improvising Freely*, Jaak Sikk argues that the use of mental imagery can raise the quality of improvising freely, because through created imagery, the meaning of improvised music expands for the improviser. His study also suggests engaging only in mental practicing, avoiding any physical contact with the instruments and mediums for some period before the performative act. Inspired by Sikk, I decided to apply Mental Imagery to my Improvisation. According to composer Sandeep Bhagwati, Improvisation appears as a practice that allows score-based notated pieces, the inclusion of improvisational elements, generating the coexistence between a contingent moment of performance, and a context-independent system of rules.

However, *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES* was not set with a written score; it was developed by memory using instrumental praxis and improvisation as main processes. Namely, my improvisation approach was simply based on interpolating and merging composition with improvisation and its functions. *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES* was structured into a set of 15 titled micro-pieces, in order to make the memorising process more simple. The titles of the pieces came from the memories of Soundscapes collected in my sonic archive, and from the titles, the improvisational discourse started.

The titles of the pieces are: 1) *Aire I*, 2) *Fast means fast*, 3) *When I was far East*, 4) *Noise, sweet noise*, 5) *Barroquiana*, 6) *Mumbling*, 7) *Layer cake*, 8) *I wanna be a one man-Free jazz-band*, 9) *To my serial and post serial friends*,

10) *Once more between Lapland and the Andes*,
 11) *Tunnel-Maa*, 12) *Double dobles*, 13) *Aire II*,
 14) *Canto a lo Divino*, and 15) *Are III*.

These are the 15 *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*, which feature sonic memories of nature in different parts of the globe, noises, elements of traditional music from the South American Andes, the Finnish Lapland; scales used in classical music from Iraq, India; Free Jazz tunes, Blues tunes, Noises, electronic music, rock music, and metal music, among others. Some of these sonic memories had been part of my musical background. Others had been only remote sonic memories. To later ones I applied the Mental Imagery process. For instance, I wanted to improvise a piece with remote sonic memories of scales used in music from Hindustan and Iraq. For this I applied Sikk's ideas as follows:

- 1) For a period of one month, every day for one hour, I imagined myself playing those scales on the modified cello.
- 2) For a period of one month, every day for one hour, after the imagery routine, I listened to music from Hindustan and Iraq.
- 3) After one month I titled the micro piece *When I was far East*.
- 4) After I titled the micro piece, I started to imagine what it would sound like for one hour, every day for one week.
- 5) After this imagery routine, I started the improvisation process and finished the micro piece after one week.

The improvised part of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES* appears only during the performance as a decision-making process in situ, depending on the space, the context, or a particular conceptual idea that crosses my mind, as well as the mental disposition I have in the exact moment of the performance. For instance, during the first time the performance was presented I decided to play 14 micro pieces only due to the timeframe given by the festival. On the other hand, I can also choose the order of the

micro pieces at the moment of the performance, since they were not made to be played in a specific order. Also, I can decide in situ and imagine my body movements and my facial expressions. For example, during the second performance, which was set up in a cold sauna, I decided in situ to perform naked, and while performing, I constantly imagined how to exaggerate every single physical gesture in order to generate a more extreme physical effort, and to produce constant sweating, as if I would be in a hot sauna. In other words, my intention is to make the performance as different as possible from one version to another, and to interact with the space and its acoustic conditions as much as possible by following mental images produced in the moment. Hence, imagery becomes an *in situ-performative score*.

The axis Displacement-Unlearning: A metaphor for my modified- [amplified] cello

Since 2013 I have been working on deconstructing the timbre and functionality of my cello through physical modifications to its body and tuning. Also experimenting different amplification set-ups. All this has expanded the sound palette of my cello, which has become more of a multi-sonic generator, but keeping its traditional sonic and physical features. Hence,

its modifications, which are constantly changing, are only perceived when it is executed. This instrumental deconstruction is a clear example of displacement. However, this displacement brings to itself a process of unlearning.

Namely, not only does every single modification and amplification set-up require new playing techniques to learn, but it also requires me to constantly unlearn previous ways of execution.

Another example of Displacement-Unlearning can be seen in the amplification idea that I came across for the second version of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*, made exclusively for UNFINISHED festival 2021. For this occasion, instead of using an electric amplifier, I used the performance space itself, a small wooden sauna, as an amplifier. This space naturally amplified the sound of my modified cello and enhanced every single sonic nuance during the performance. This form of amplification represents at the same time a form of space re-signification, hence, displacement.

Moreover, the fact that I had never played before in a sauna and naked, and my decision on not checking the sound at all before the performance, put me in different Unlearning situations. For instance, I had to unlearn my previous physical position with the cello and learn a new one, since there was not space for a chair to sit on and because of the sticky feeling of the cello wood against my naked body. Also, I had to unlearn my previous amplification set-up and accommodate myself to the cello's resonance in the sauna. Furthermore, playing in an unknown space, forces me to make aesthetic decisions in real time, such as changing articulation or playing louder. At the same time I had to learn and unlearn in the moment, and react in the moment to that space. It was a challenge I wanted to face. Displace, unlearn and, learn again in situ.

Conclusions and reflections

In this performance all the processes and the notions above mentioned are complementary. Namely, displacement is a crucial part of unlearning, and unlearning constitutes a displacement act. Furthermore, using Mental

Imagery as a tool for improvisation is an unlearning and a displacement act as well.

On the other hand, during both the creative process and the two existing presentations of *GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES*, I recognised a boucle of unlearning-learning-unlearning, and a constant state of displacement, through Mental Imagery. This phenomenon constituted to me a sort of transcendental act that I would call *Translearning*. This act, which suggests constant change, not only conveyed the understanding of the genesis of this performance, but the understanding of my artistic and cultural identity.

At last

I am aware of that unique ongoing and complex sound that lives around and inside me, that never stops moving, that changes second by second.

At last

I understood that I will continue to live in that endless and personal state of

“Soundscape Displacement”.

Performance Link

<https://sergiocastrillon.com/cello-action-performing/>

GLOBAL SOUNDSCAPES: A Comprovised-Sonic Piece for solo modified-[amplified] cello, is the second in a series of four multi-sonic performances. These performances are part of a two-year artistic research project funded by Kone Foundation (Finland).

