Introduction

Amy Chan

*Sounds in Translation: Intersections of music, technology and society* joins a growing number of publications taking up R. Murray Schafer’s challenge to examine and to refocus attention on the sound dimensions of our human environment. His book *The Soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world* (1977/1994) explores the idea of the ‘sound-scape’, the acoustic environment that we inhabit. Schafer invited researchers in the area of sound and music to investigate the origins, causes and impacts of new (and changing) sounds in rural and urban environments and to ask ‘what is the relationship between man [sic] and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change?’ (1977:3–4). He concluded that the ‘home territory of soundscape studies’ is at the crossroads of ‘science, society and the arts’ (Schafer 1977). Subsequent volumes have taken up this challenge: *Wireless Imagination: Sound, radio and the avant-garde* (Kahn and Whitehead 1992), *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural acoustics and the culture of listening in America, 1900–1933* (Thompson 2002), *The Audible Past: Cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Sterne 2003), *Sound Matters: Essays on the acoustics of modern German culture* (Alter and Koepnick 2004) and *Hearing Cultures: Essays on sound, listening and modernity* (Erlmann 2004). These books illuminate the sound aspects of a socio-historical period, be it in the Americas in the early twentieth century, in Germany in the past 200 years or in others. Their discussions also add to the current discourse on sound and the concepts of ‘sound’ and the sound-scape. As Alter and Koepnick have noted, there is still very little in our present critical vocabulary relating specifically to sound. The terminologies we presently use are terms borrowed from the vocabulary devised to describe the visual. *Sounds in Translation* seeks to add to this discourse and ultimately to expand this vocabulary to better interpret and explicate the actions and interactions of sound within domestic, public, urban, rural, private and performance environments.

The initial aim for this project was to open a dialogue between scholars and researchers in sound-related disciplines within the Asia-Pacific region. The conference that initiated the project drew researchers from various parts of Australia and New Zealand, discussing the multi-layered, multifaceted and multi-focal nature of sound. From the papers presented at the conference, we observed that there was certainly energetic research activity in sound studies from this region. Each of these articles responded to our call for papers on a topic that was inter/trans-disciplinary, crossing the boundaries of science, social science and the humanities. Discussion on sounds has been defined by the various
disciplines: as a science subject, it has been the focus within areas of acoustics, sound production and technology (see works by Taylor 1965; Fletcher and Rossing 1998; Rossing and Fletcher 2004) and therapy (Unkefer 1990 and many more). In the field of social science, within the sub-disciplines of anthropology/ethnomusicology (for example, Feld 1982; Seeger 1987) and, most recently, sociology (as in the study of popular music) (Mitchell 1996; Hayward 1999 and many more), sound is studied as a manifestation of social meaning (as the expressed conduit of deeper social meaning), as traditionally adherent or otherwise. From a humanities perspective, sound is usually studied as ‘music’, and within Western culture and history, this has its own discourse and discursive practice. Needless to say, these studies do not easily share information across these boundaries and there is no established dialogic relationship between one study and another across disciplines. It was the objective of the conference and this book to provide the opportunity and space for such an interaction, particularly for those working within this geographical region of the Asia-Pacific.

In the process, we promote the interrogation of sound as a concept: how do its physical attributes (in terms of sound waves and its frequencies) translate into meaning? How have we imbued meaning onto sound objects, and what are their effects on human thought and activity? Can we understand sound outside of its music/social/cultural environment? When and how does noise cross over into music? When is sound ‘art’? How is sound trans-cultural? How has the commodification (recording, packaging and selling/buying) of sound changed our perception of it? To answer these questions and more, we facilitated scholarly discussions on the theme ‘sounds in translation’, sharing ideas and practical experiments on the various facets of this concept. Our conference created a space in which to establish discourse and (hopefully) laid the foundations for further interdisciplinary exploration.

_Sounds in Translation_, the book, is our attempt to further consolidate what transpired during the conference and to allow amplified discussions and discourse on this topic. It is our hope that each strand of inquiry presented in this book will stimulate further investigations. The collection of essays reveals different facets of the concept/artefact of sound: as art (as in sound art) in the context of a staged performance, as a cultural practice bearing ritualistic significance, as enunciated in language and its day-to-day usage and as an identifiable object to be transferred from one person to another, one generation to another, one period to another. In each of these aspects, the concept ‘sound’ is conceived of in its full spectrum, from music to noise. What some might regard as noise (and therefore as ‘waste matter’ of human activity) is at the very least part of the sound-scape of this environment we live in. While some of our contributors discuss their manipulation of sound in various performances and contexts, others attempt to understand sound as it is.
The Sounds in Translation conference was conceived as a platform for discourse on sound (and the concept ‘sound’) outside the boundaries of musicology. Books such as Richard Leppert’s *The Sight of Sound* (1993) and Andrew Ford’s *Undue Noise* (2002) might appear to interrogate the idea of sound itself, but they are really appropriating the term ‘sound’ to discuss the cultural aspect of this sensory experience and, in most cases, the Western cultural aspect only. Music-centred analysis of sound—and here I’m referring to research and analysis undertaken within the disciplines of musicology, ethnomusicology and music theory—analyses and perceives sound through the prism of culture (and art and its practice as part of the larger cultural practice of any society). Academic ‘discourse can become a site of struggle among the factions and interest groups that compete for the cultural authority to speak about music…[The] impulse to control and centralize scholarly production is forming discourse in the opposite direction…toward increasing uniformity’ (Korsyn 2003:6). Korsyn goes on to discuss the identities scholars ‘stake…on a particular mode of discourse’. This increasing uniformity has marginalised other works and research that are not immediately within its range and has discouraged the search for and recognition of other plausible prisms to perceive and conceive sound. It is our intention that this platform (in terms of the Sounds in Translation conference and book) is open to other prisms of analyses, perception and conception.

When we—the organisers and editors of the conference and this volume—looked beyond the familiar disciplinary area of music research, we found ourselves in the company of many unique researchers. Following Schaefer’s (1977/1994) notion of the ‘interdiscipline’ (as the ground or space where the three major branches of academia intersect), we chose our theme ‘sound in translation’ with the hope to further advance thinking on this interdisciplinary space. We use ‘translation’ for its connotation of moving, crossing and process. The word ‘translation’ can mean to transfer, to transform and as a process of expressing/expression (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1978).

Using these various definitions, this book seeks to raise some salient questions regarding the translative process of sound: 1) what happens to sound during the process of transfer and transformation; and 2) what transpires in the process of sound production/expression/performance. Within the scope of performance (the expressed enunciated form of sound), we analyse the changes wrought—on either the sound component itself or its capacity for further signification. Critical appraisal of the process of translation, in particular its translation cross-culturally, is important to each of these essays. Hazel Smith’s chapter (‘“soundAFFECTs”: translation, writing, new media, affect’) discusses the combination of sound, image and text in a multimedia performance that is not music, literature, performance or technology, but all of the above. In the trans-media experiment of ‘soundAFFECTs’, Smith brings together multiple forms of media (sound, text and image) with the aid of technology provided by Roger Dean in the form of a
real-time image-processing program. She then examines the process of translating the print-based text ‘AFFECTions’ to a multimedia performance of ‘soundAFFECTIONS’, and the changes in its affectability (on an audience) of each of these different performances. Alistair Riddell’s ‘Edible Audience: what about this gastronomic performance translated as sound art?’ is another combination of sound, image and technology, but with live performance that does not involve text. Riddell’s chapter, like Smith’s, examines the dual process of translation: it is, first, concerned with the translation of the act of dining into a sound-art performance, and second, its capacity to communicate to a general audience, in particular how an audience will be able to construct meaning from a non-verbal technology-based performance.

Freya Bailes’ chapter discusses the losses and gains that take place in the process of transfer between the point of input, when a musician reads a musical score, and the point of output, when the score is realised in music during performance. With her case studies, she demonstrates that in the process of translating sound to mental imagery the ‘veridical nature of sound colour’ is lost, but the re-imaging through active imagination augments its expressivity and meaning. Nicholas Ng’s chapter, ‘Domesticating the foreign’, features a similar process of loss and gain, highlighting also a dual-translation process: one of language and linguistic differences between Mandarin, Cantonese and English, and another of the transference of Catholic practice from Rome (originally), via Hong Kong/Taiwan and finally to Sydney. Both processes led to a negotiated compromise: a hybrid of language and practices as accumulated through the migratory and assimilative processes in which the ‘purity’ of a single language or practice was rendered unimportant.

Jennifer Gall’s chapter plays with ideas of impurity, or inauthenticity, by examining the incorporation of the sound-scape of a recording of a song made in the 1950s into her reproduction of the same song in more recent times. Her discussion (and performance) of Green Bushes recognises the ‘inauthenticity’ of her version of the folk song and, in fact, plays it up. While on one hand, Gall’s performance attempts to retain the identity of the folk song along with its recorded context (that is, the kitchen), her ‘play’ on its authenticity, as reflected in the digital manipulation provided by Ian Blake, demonstrates its impossibility. Her performance (as argued in her chapter) reflects the interaction (the to and fro) between the past and the present and the impossibility of recreating a replica in a present-day performance of the song. Adam Shoemaker’s chapter on the sonic reverberations of the archaeological discovery of the ‘footprint site’ at Lake Mungo in New South Wales similarly traces a linearity between the past and the present, questioning the sonic busyness of the place/space on the basis of a personal, experiential understanding of the site. He mixes the present-day sound of digging, camera shots and footsteps (of the many researchers and
journalists) with the long-ago (imagined) sound of the dead as conjured by this discovery.

My own chapter aims to question sound’s meaning and capacity to represent in a changing environment, using as a case study a traditional drum performance as restaged on the concert platform. I argue that the translation of the shigu (Chinese drums) from one performance context to another (from a traditional environment to a modern/artistic one, each with its own values and significance) has, first, de-territorialised, and second, re-territorialised it, altering its nature, identity, value and representation in the process.

Phil Rose’s ‘Singing the syllables’ and Henry Johnson’s ‘Voice-scapes: transl(oc)ating the performed voice in ethnomusicology’ find their speaking positions between language and music. Rose and Johnson demonstrate the proximity of sound and speech in their respective chapters. While Rose raises the plausibility of the use of musical techniques and analysis to shed further light on Tibetan spelling chant, Johnson argues that speech and song are not separate entities but are better conceived as two poles of a continuum. The cross-disciplinary approach of linguistics and music allows for a more nuanced understanding of sound and sound products as they appear within the sound-scape.

Sound is ephemeral and ubiquitous or, as Alter and Koepnick (2004) put it, ‘pervasive, invasive and evasive’. As a subject, it is difficult and problematic to represent and has not been, until recently with the aid of technology, able to ‘speak for itself’. The audible sound often required the visual/text (be it in notation and graphs or in language) for its representation, conservation and transmission. It is only in recent times, with the aid of technology, that we have been able to ‘capture’ sound and transfer it. More recent technology, however, has allowed for almost instantaneous transmission across spatial distances via the Internet. It has enabled sound to represent itself, albeit mediated by technology. Sounds in Translation, the book, was conceived to take advantage of this new technology and the development in publishing of the electronic book. Much of what is written in the book is best illustrated by the sound itself and, in that sense, permitting sound to ‘speak for itself’, as none of the volumes mentioned earlier has that capability. We hope that the simultaneous accessibility of the book in print and e-format will provide better and easier access for our readers, and also engender a more instantaneous discussion and feedback.
Bibliography


Introduction
