**Found Sounds: Music from The Mundane (Intermediate)**

Zack Moir

*Edinburgh Napier University, United Kingdom*

**Description**

*This recipe encourages learners to develop their critical and analytic listening skills by seeking and recording sounds in their environment as a basis for music composition. The use of unorthodox (i.e. not inherently musical) sounds in a compositional context develops critical listening, creative use of recorded material, and encourages the exploration of the sonic and functional possibilities afforded by DAW technologies in working with and manipulating audio as a basis for composition.*

**Materials**

* A portable digital audio recorder or a mobile phone with a recording app
* Any DAW that allows users to import and manipulate audio

**Context**

The role of the educator is to be a facilitator and guide for the learners. As such, this activity can function with one student or more. If equipment is scarce, students can share and work collaboratively. There are two distinct phases for the activity: (1) Collection and (2) Manipulation.

For the *Collection* phase any environment in which students can find sounds that they believe to be “interesting” is acceptable. I invite learners to consider their immediate surroundings first (a quiet lecture room), then we explore the rest of the building (inevitably finding some interesting sounds in busy spaces like the café or public foyers, for example). Eventually we venture out and explore the surrounding community and collect sounds from the outdoors (e.g. traffic, wind noise, rain on windows), and experiment with making sounds by striking/shaking/exciting objects in the environment.

Typically, the *Manipulation* phase of this project would take place in a computer lab where students can use DAW software to process and manipulate the samples that they have collected.

**Lesson Time**

This project does not have to be time consuming. That said, it is important to ensure that you leave enough time for exploration in both the *collection* and *manipulation* phases. Ideally, one would devote two 2-hour sessions to this activity, but with some independent student-led work in between the two facilitated sessions.The timings provided below are based on this timescale but these can be reduced or increased depending on the time available.

**Lesson Instructions**

Background:

I frequently “find” music and derive meaningful musical experiences from sounds that other people would not necessarily regard as “musical.” In recent years, I have been drawing on this experience and use it as the initial learning experience for my first-year university popular music composition students (in the UK this is typically learners around 17-18 years of age).

Young popular music students often tell me that their default approach to composing/creating music is to use a DAW and to start by finding instrument presets or samples that they like and compose a track using these pre-existing components. Additional layers of audio, such as vocals or live instruments, may be added but the starting point is often one that is essentially curtailed by the parameters of software presets, workflows, or technical knowledge/ability. This, in turn, can lead to students reverting to habitual processes or falling into genre stereotypes that may be imposed by the samples available or the stylistic significance (or even baggage) attached to certain timbres and instrumental sounds, for example.

Phase 1: *Collection* (2 hours)

1. *Briefing* (30 minutes): The first session should begin with an introductory discussion in which the facilitator provides some background to the activity and tries to determine the nature of the learners’ prior experience in this area, if any. Learners are then given their brief, which is to go into the environment in search of sounds that they feel are ‘interesting’ and that are/could be considered ‘musical’. The term ‘musical’ is deliberately used as a problematic and ambiguous word - the intention is for the students to decide what this word means to them, and why (please see the Modifications section, below, for suggested alterations to this brief). I want my students to start to listen to sounds in their environment analytically, to think about the ways in which sound is perceived, and to consider the ways in which music can be found (or drawn) from unexpected sources.
2. *Checking* (5 minutes): Check that each learner has something to record with, and that they know how to operate their device.
3. *Recording* (60 minutes): Proceed to the location in which you plan to collect (i.e. record) sounds and start looking/listening for things that you would like to record. This should also include some discussion on the nature and character of the sound and possible musical uses in a compositional context.
4. *Transfer, Preparation, and File Management* (25 minutes): The final stage in the *Collection* phase is for learners to transfer the files that they have recorded on their portable device to the computer that they will be using for the second phase. I always try to ensure that this does not simply turn into a bulk upload of the files, but that there is also a degree of preparation and file management at this stage. I encourage my students to listen to their files, trim any extraneous sections of the audio (e.g. fumbling with the recorder, unintended noises, speech etc.) and to give them a suitable and meaningful name (e.g. door-slam, vending-machine, raindrops, etc.). A bit of preparation and organization at this stage makes it easier to deal with the numerous recordings that will be used to make music during the next phase.

Phase 2: *Manipulation* (2 hours)

1. *Briefing* (20 minutes): I start the second phase of the activity by continuing the introductory discussion and playing examples (see resources section, below, for details) of music that either contains found sounds or is based on this approach to music making. This allows learners to gain inspiration and provides them with a starting point for the way in which they may approach the project.
2. *Experimentation* (40 minutes): Learners are then encouraged to start working in the DAW, importing files, editing sounds, applying effects, layering tracks, etc. Some students create simple loops, some students drench sounds in effects to create interesting soundscapes, and some students use samplers to explore micro-sampling and granular synthesis, effectively creating their own instruments based on the sounds that they have collected. I remember, from recent iterations of the project, a particularly successful bass synth that started as a sample of a lawn-mower, a beautiful “glockenspiel” made from the sound of a metal gate being struck, and a drum kit made from the sounds of a coffee machine. There should be no limit to the sounds that can be created and students should feel empowered and encouraged to experiment with hardware and software in a way that lets them realise the sounds they are imagining for their composition.   
    I like to provide guidance and support on an individual basis at this stage, and I move around the room checking how each student is progressing. Sometimes this involves talking to students about their ideas or helping them with specific aspects of their software.
3. *Peer Discussion* (40 minutes): After around 40 minutes of experimentation, I like to bring the learners together for a group discussion in which they play their work to their peers and provide some background on their approach and aims. This discussion is useful as a window for formative feedback, but it also encourages learners to articulate their intentions, and provides them with an opportunity to gain insights into the working practices of their peers.
4. *Further Experimentation* (20 minutes): Following the initial period of experimentation and the peer discussion/feedback session, I encourage learners to spend another short period of time making any edits that they wish to or exploring ideas that have been suggested by me or their peers. I like my students to be in a position by the end of the second session, in which they have their material in order and some concrete ideas for how the music will take shape – this extra experimentation time allows for this to happen.
5. *Independent Refinement* (duration depends on the learner): In the context of my undergraduate programme, students either have their own equipment or have access to the university’s facilities. As such, the final step is to allow them one week to refine their ideas and create the final mix of their music. If other contexts do not allow for this, then extra class time should be devoted to this refinement/finalization period.

**Modifications for Learners**

Inevitably, educators will find that students have varying degrees of experience using the requisite technology. Additionally, some students will be familiar with digital music production and sampling; this is exciting, and these students should be made to feel comfortable and encouraged to stretch themselves, and perhaps even help their peers.

For younger learners, people who have limited experience creating music in this way, or people who feel inhibited for any reason, a number of modifications can be made. For example:

* Sometimes a solid brief to guide listeners in their sound collection can be useful. This can be thematic (e.g. the theme is transport – go and collect as many interesting transport noises as you can), or sonic (e.g. find resonant sounds, or collect high pitched sounds) but some direction, essentially an imposed limitation, can be a support for those who are unsure of what to do or how to go about collecting sounds.
* The same applies to the second phase—*Manipulation*—as sometimes students find that the ‘blank slate’ of an empty DAW session is daunting. Although they have a somewhat limited palette due to the range of sounds that they have collected, it can feel to some as if the possibilities of how these sounds can be dealt with are limitless. Again, direction and imposed limitations can be useful here. This might be achieved by stipulating a style in which the learners have to compose. It may be that you limit them to only using four tracks, or that you say they can only use a limited number of plugins. I have found that restrictions help to focus their ideas and can, in turn, lead to moments of inspiration.
* I have run this activity with learners with a range of physical disabilities who have found it difficult to explore their physical environment due to mobility issues and motor control. To reiterate, the role of the educator in this context is to facilitate the learners’ explorations, and it may be necessary to adapt the procedure. In one case when I was working with a learner who had limited movement of his limbs, we collected sounds from his wheelchair, including motor noises, wheel sounds, and the noises he made when he rocked back and forth in his seat. This allowed for the meaningful exploration of his physical environment without having to travel. I would encourage educators to try to look for similar opportunities, should the need arise.

**Learning Outcomes**

This activity encourages students to break habits, listen at a deeper level, and consider their music in a way that goes beyond the melodic/harmonic/rhythmic content that is the typical priority and preoccupation of young students in this area. By considering their music from this sonic perspective, it is hoped (and is usually the case) that the students will uncover new and interesting perspectives on composition and production that they may not have arrived at by conventional or habitual practice. I want them to think about sound as a starting point for musical creativity and be free to explore this without the burden of influence from technology or stylistic preconceptions.

* *Critical and Analytic Listening:* Throughout the process of listening to sounds in the environment, recording them, manipulating them, and creating/mixing the music, listening is a key part of this work. This activity requires learners to listen critically and analytically and the frequent discussions about sounds and musical applications built into the activity helps learners to hone and develop these skills in a constructive and supportive way.
* *Sonic Manipulation:* Beyond the DAW-specific practicalities of manipulating audio, this activity encourages learners to develop knowledge of the ways in which audio can be manipulated and effected in order to create different musical sounds. This, in turn, is highly useful as it often leads to teachable moments in which the educator can start to impart knowledge or explain other concepts. For example, certain sounds may require students to use EQ or compression, for example, and educators can use this as a real-world opportunity to introduce these concepts/techniques/equipment more formally.
* *Creative Thinking and Musical Imagination:* Encouraging students to begin a process of composition without instruments or music technology can be daunting; however, this process leads to learners thinking about the composition of music in a completely different way, and one that allows them to be free of idiomatic/technological/stylistic constraints. I often find that the music that arises from this project does not feel clichéd or like pastiche, and learners report that they enjoy and thrive on working in a way that allows them to think beyond presets and to try to strive to create the sounds that they hear in their heads and not those that are “in the box.”

**Assessment Considerations**

In the context of the undergraduate programme in which I typically employ this activity, the work created by my students is directly assessed as part of a composition portfolio. For each piece that is submitted as part of this portfolio, the student includes (a) the track, (b) a document outlining their rationale and evaluating the work, and (c) some sort of visual representation - I hesitate to use the word ‘score’ - for the purposes of analysis (not necessarily to reproduce a performance). In submitting these components the students not only present the music they have made, but the accompanying documentation allows them to explore and reflect on their creative intentions, analyse the effectiveness of their technical and compositional processes, and communicate the nature of the music and how it is constructed, to others. Communication of these ideas and analyses can also be delivered effectively in a presentation format—I would suggest that the ideas and degree of self-reflection are what should be assessed, not necessarily the means of delivery, or the final product.

**Further Reading/Resources**

*Music*

Herbert, M. (2011) One Pig [CD], London: Accidental Records. All sounds on this record were generated from Herbert’s recordings of the life cycle of a farmed pig from birth to the dinner plate (including cooking the meat).

Stocco, D. (2010) Music From a Bonsai [Online]. Available at: https://vimeo.com/10198497 [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019]. All the sounds in this piece are recordings of Stocco touching a Bonsai tree (brushing leaves, “pinging” branches, hitting the trunk, etc.). This artist makes a lot of music from objects, plants, trees, landscapes etc., and his work often captures the imagination of my students.

Matmos (2001). A Chance to Cut Is a Chance to Cure. [CD] New York: Matador Records. All the sounds on this record are made from recordings of medical procedures.

Matmos (2016). Ultimate Care II [CD] Chicago: Thrill Jockey. All the sounds on this record are made from the sounds of a washing machine (both mechanical sounds and through striking and playing with parts of the machine.

Moir, Z. (2018). *IDDM*. [Online] Edinburgh: Stitch Records. Available at: https://open.spotify.com/album/2QTcIvKrHCMmXQjj7iKGvr?si=fMXBWEX4RUqM\_UsZ0x\_IPQ [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019]. All the samples used in this piece are taken from diabetes paraphernalia.

*Books*

Cox, T.J. (2014). *Sonic wonderland*: *A scientific odyssey of sound*. London: The Bodley Head.

Lane, C. & Carlyle, A., (2013). *In the field: The art of field recording*. Axminster: Uniformbooks.

Schafer, R. M. (1994). *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, NY: Destiny Books.