

## Idiorrhythmy

**Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson**

*In a contribution to the first Paris workshop of Atelier TM, Graeme Thomson and Silvia Maglioni focused on the soundwalk between Porte de La Chapelle and the site of the new Philharmonie building in the Parc de la Villette. Presented here is a six-minute edited recording of and reflection on the sonic events encountered on the walk.*

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A sound walk affords a particular kind of listening pleasure, that of discovering sounds on the move, sensing the as-yet mysterious borders of new sound phenomena as they come into our range of hearing, overlap with and eventually replace those we have previously encountered and recognized. In this sense, movement through a space has the potential to make our hearing more dynamic, letting it function like a multi-track mixing board, mapping the shifting acoustic space between the nearby and the far off, the already heard and the not yet audible, blending the frequencies and timbres of different noises and perhaps uncovering ghost harmonics in their intervals, bringing up certain sounds as we approach their sources, fading out others as we leave them in our wake. What makes such an experience more or less engaging is, on one hand, the heterogeneity of the sounds we encounter and, on the other, the porosity of the sonic environment, a porosity that is perhaps shared by the listener who, attracted to and invaded by odd sound events, might experience a kind of drift to the membranous borders of their own subjective awareness.

Sonic heterogeneity, it could be said, depends to a large extent on how far the area in question is able to accommodate different forms of life, rhythms of work or play, languages, modes of behaviour and types of activity, both human and non-human. Porosity is a question of the openness of the sound field, the extent to which these elements are, or become, present to, and perhaps even through, each other, which can also be an indicator of the relative “openness” of the neighbourhood.. Both factors contribute to what we might call an idiorrhythmic mode of listening and of traversing an environment. By this we mean a form of auditory attention that attributes value and meaning to the play of rhythmic differences, both macro and micro, encountered in the sound field, whether synchronic or diachronic and at whatever level of audibility. The more open windows there are on the route, the richer and more varied this sonic texture tends to be

Idiorrhythmy is a term that first appeared in the early middle ages in connection with certain orders of monks whose members, though they might have dwelt in the same space were free to live, work

and wander each according to his own specific rhythms. In his Collège de France lectures collected under the overall title, *Comment vivre ensemble*, Roland Barthes deploys the notion of idiorrhythmy to describe his desire for a society that would respect the behavioural idiosyncrasies of its members, while noting that idiorrhythmic orders were gradually purged from the church in favour of centrally controlled Cenobitic orders of monks who lived communally according to a single rule and rhythm (etymologically rhythm and rule are synonymous, both deriving from the Greek *rhythmos*), and who according to Barthes provided an early template for modern forms of governmentality and social organization.

As a model for social coexistence, idiorrhythmy seems to carry within it a danger of fragmentation into atomised individualism. A key question is the extent to which members of such a community become absorbed in the particular rhythm of their own activity and its expression to the exclusion of all others. Listening, in our view, might play an important role in conceiving an idiorrhythmic sociality in which people engaged in a particular activity can become more aware of and affected by rhythms outside and different to those of their own sphere. This would also imply a partial shift away from a model of listening that functions according to a hierarchy of aural attention based on the immediate communicational value of utterances within a given field, with a premium being placed on those which show mastery of, and thus compliance with, the dominant linguistic code. It also raises the question of whether the idiorrhythmic character of an environment might be augmented through discreet sonic interventions. One thing we noticed as we arrived at the Parc de la Villette, for instance was the muteness of the Philharmonie building. Despite its stated objective of reaching out the community and bringing classical music to new audiences, the building itself emitted no sound. We left wondering what might change in the way people inhabit the park if during rehearsals, or as part of its music tuition programme, the Philharmonie left a few windows open?

Graeme Thomson & Silvia Maglioni