

## STUDIES ON SOUNDSCAPES OF POLISH CITIES. THE CASE OF WROCLAW

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*Abstract: The soundscape of cities is a subject of research of various disciplines, e.g., acoustics, cultural anthropology, landscape architecture, geography, urban studies, sociology, musicology. Whereas the representatives of other sciences concentrate on non-musical phonic elements which co-create the audio sphere of towns, phenomena of the so-called melosphere or the characteristic, significant sphere, singled out by men from the sound background, are in the center of interest of musicologists. The aspect of significance in the above definition has a strict musical reference, but also a social one. It concerns significances and values of the melosphere as cultural transmission. Research on these phenomena covers not only its documentation but also an identification of the phonic identity of the city. Studies on functional and axiological aspects of musical sounds in the city space require taking into consideration their reception by inhabitants of the town which is examined through interviews.*

*The presented assumptions are, e.g., program guidelines of the Studio of Research on Soundscape in the Institute of Cultural Studies at the Wrocław University. The scope of its activities is to record the phonic phenomena during field research conducted in the area of Lower Silesia with its capital in Wrocław and to investigate a problem of cultural identity of this region in the context of phonic experiences of its residents. Much store is set by music which is connected with the given city through its historic or ethnic tradition (for example bugle-call, city folklore) as well as by music performed on the streets by foreign musicians.*

Key words: *Wrocław; soundscape; audiosphere*

My presentation is a report on the state of research on soundscapes, carried out among Polish musicologists, cultural theorists and anthropologists. The city of

Wrocław mentioned in the title is not only the subject of the case studies, but is also a major center of such research in Poland.

Discussions on the philosophies and methodologies for studies on issues related to urban soundscapes take place in Poland in broad, interdisciplinary groups. Results are presented at conferences which bring geographers, ecologists, urban planners and landscape architects, who emphasize the pragmatic aspects of research related to health, together with ethnologists, cultural theorists and musicologists, who give priority to the cultural context of experiencing the audiosphere. The latter course of research will be the subject of my article.

Projects and activities undertaken in Poland refer to the soundscape concept of Raymond Murray Schafer, which was popularized after his works were translated into Polish (by Danuta Gwizdalanka and Maksymilian Kapelański) and monographs concerning it were written by some musicologists and composers (Kapelański, Lidia Zielińska, Anna Archer). In 1982, the first Polish translation of Schafer's *The Music of the Environment* (Vienna 1973) was published; afterwards other texts were translated in the '80s.

In Wrocław academic studies of the city soundscape were begun by Maciej Gołąb, who was the author of the project "Wrocław soundscapes. Research on the audiosphere of the Central-European metropolis" in 2004. As a musicologist with a systematic approach, Gołąb's first step was to find an adequate set of concepts. He linked the concept of soundscape with the usual topics of his interests, among which the most important is art music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gołąb organized sound phenomena of the city audiosphere into distinct categories: the phonosphere, that is, the natural background or ambient sounds; the melosphere, which consists of utilitarian sound events of the phonosystem; and the sonosphere, which includes the artistic sound discourses of the phonosystem. He derived these categories from a trichotomical division of all acoustical events: tones, sounds and noises.

As for the most important sources of the urban phonosystem, Gołąb created the following categories:

1. the acoustic effects of the area's environment and its urban flora and fauna (*musica naturalis*);
2. non-musical yet anthropogenic sounds—the phonosphere of metropolitan civilization (*musica humana*);
3. the cultural melosphere of media, advertisements, computer games and technical gadgets (*musica vulgaris*);
4. the artistic phonosphere of homes and their adjacent areas, parks, discotheques and nightclubs, concert halls and sacral places (*musica artificialis*).

The Latin terms alluding to the medieval systematization of music, quoted by Gołąb along with the categories he introduces, show – as was his intention – the historical universalism of human perception of soundscapes. He also refers to an anonymous treatise from the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, preserved in the Ossolineum Library in Wrocław. In the treatise is the following passage:

“There are three types of *musica diatonica*: *naturalis*, *usualis* and *artificialis*. *Naturalis* is the sounding of celestial objects, caused by the motion of the spheres [...] *Usualis* or *irregularis* is the emission of sounds released in different ways, in ascending or descending motions, without any proper musical rules. And *artificialis* is the proper science of modulation, which considers a number of sounds for playing a melody: so there are two types of this music, *instrumentalis* and *vocalis*” (Witkowska-Zaręba 1986: 249).

In the treatise *musica naturalis* means music existing beyond any human being, totally autonomous; *musica artificialis* refers to music whose existence depends on man and his skills, while *musica usualis* indicates music given by nature, not according to human-made rules (Witkowska-Zaręba 1986: 250).

The trichotomical division in the aforementioned treatise can be seen – in Gołąb’s opinion – as a paradigm of a long-lasting process of gradual narrowing and then, in the works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers – widening the very essentials of what is understood by the term *musica* in the history of thought on music (Gołąb 2004).

The audiosphere in Gołąb’s framework is a complex and layered communication system whose structure in particular urban centers is unique, yet is becoming more and more unified as globalization progresses. Any research on this subject should focus on revealing the changes in the urban phonosystem. This should be achieved by critical studies and interpretations of sources: analyses of literature and iconographical studies as indirect sources and phonographic documents as direct research sources.

The agenda proposed by Maciej Gołąb was the impetus for developing studies on the audiosphere of Wrocław by ethnology and cultural studies researchers. Since October 1, 2009, such studies have been aligned with the Interdisciplinary Department of Soundscape Research opened at the Institute of Cultural Studies at the University of Wrocław, with the head of the department, musicologist and cultural studies researcher, Robert Losiak. In these studies the focal point has shifted toward the cultural context of experiencing the audiosphere, including the perceptive as well as the semiotic and axiotic aspects of such an experience.

The most important issue for the research associated with this department is the relationship between man and his phonic environment. Phonic space that surrounds man is recognized as an important factor in the process of “making a place for himself” in the world. The experience of phonic presence in the environment is a deeply existential experience that strongly influences both the biological and the cultural dimensions of human beings.

The project “Soundscapes of Wrocław” carried out by the department consists of field research followed by descriptions and analyses of musical phenomena registered in the public spaces of the city, while respecting the functional and infrastructural differentiation of urban space and also bearing in mind situational and time contexts. The term “soundscape” is defined by the project’s author, Robert Losiak, as an image of the individual experience of the audiosphere; it depicts a process in which the objectively existing acoustical environment is transformed into environment for an observer. “Audiosphere” is a wider concept, as it includes all phonic events, both those perceived by a person and those which are left unnoticed, unimportant or inaudible because of flaws in human hearing. The project’s goal is to create a descriptive reconstruction of the urban audiosphere, assuming presentation of phonic events in a shape of systematized structure and to demonstrate the phonic distinctions of Wrocław’s audiosphere, while pointing out some of the typical sound phenomena that combine to establish the identity of the city.<sup>1</sup>

The perceiver’s point of orientation emphasized in the soundscape category was identified as the most important problem for research on the audiosphere. Losiak proposed a model of soundscape studies (Losiak 2007: 242) in which the main points are:

1. inclusion of the main rules of auditory perception in soundscape characteristics, as soundscape is assigned through the perspective of the human ear, which, in the act of perception, creates a framework for the experience of soundscape;
2. research on descriptions and statements about phonic events in specified places linked to the locations of those places which sum up the auditory experience of the city by its citizens and other people staying in it;
3. dealing with an experience of the audiosphere as with cultural transmission, which leads to the necessity of recognizing phonic phenomena as a platform for meanings and values;

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.kulturoznawstwo.uni.wroc.pl/?page\\_id=425](http://www.kulturoznawstwo.uni.wroc.pl/?page_id=425) (30.04.2011).

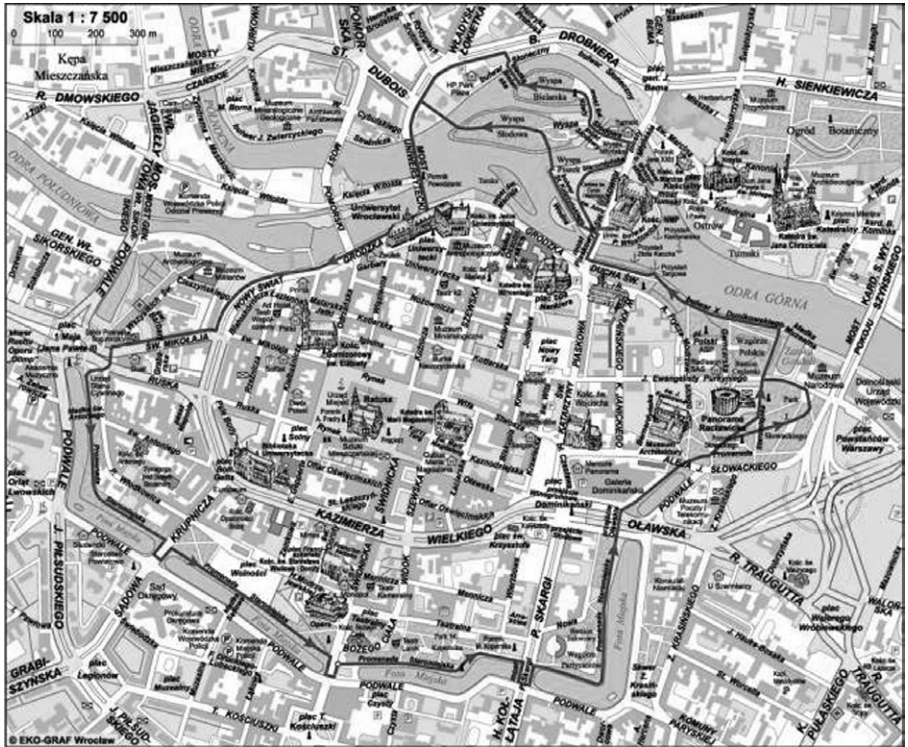


Fig. 1: Map of Wrocław.

4. identifying the soundscape described by participants of the urban audiosphere as an image, in which an attitude toward their very own presence in the city space is expressed, as well as a degree of submission and affirmation toward their life in the city.

The relationship between the place and music that fills it is described in both time-space and cultural dimensions. There is a fundamental issue in this context that needs to be researched, namely, whether music that constitutes the audiosphere of a city is fixed permanently to its space, linked with a specified object or place, like a street or building, or is present only accidentally and randomly. The space can be limited or open; however, in some cases it can be totally ruled by music. Losiak distinguishes between music specific to the city, culturally (historically, ethnically) connected to the city and defining its identity, which he calls “a music

of the city”; and music which lacks any direct association to cultural or phonic traditions of the city, which he calls “music **in** the city.” “Music **of** the city” is created especially by clearly artistic activities (for example street musicians). It is an important expression of the creative efforts of independent artists and an essential component of the musical traditions of the city. Through conscious composition and arrangement “music **for** the city” can be created, but it does not necessarily have to be a part of “music **of** the city” (Losiak 2008: 255f).

An antonym for this category is random music, which is not a result of conscious or intended activities and can even be viewed as some kind of audiosphere pollution. Another distinction is live music and recorded music, the latter heard not only in business centers, malls, cafes, and clubs, but also inside cars, houses, etc. Referring to the relationship between music and places, the separation of public and private spheres should be stressed, and some ethical issues noted which are related to trespassing the borders of musical presence, its emerging into a public space from cell phones, loud Walkmans and iPods, or from parties singing in the night. In such situations musical presence can be experienced as “acoustic violence.”

Regarding the time dimension of soundscape, Losiak points out the existence of various types of the rhythmic patterns of an audiosphere which are tied to some extent with musical events (Losiak 2007: 256f). These are:

1. daytime cycle, marked with such phonic events as an hourly bugle-call played at a fixed hour, church bells’ sounds or the music of street entertainers;
2. feast days cycle, when music is present in the city in the form of outdoor concerts, street parades or is accompanying church or state celebrations;
3. year-cycle, ordered by seasonal changes, influencing the possibility of street music or outdoor concerts.

In discussing the concept of urban soundscapes, the problem of the meaning of music plays an important role, since urban space is acknowledged in its cultural dimensions. In statements of people with whom interviews were conducted, music was often indicated as a primary event in their consideration of phonic characteristics of specific places. This opinion was affirmed by observations of citizens’ behavior in the city space, for example, the expressions of pedestrians, concert and picnic audiences, and customers in clubs and cafes.

Although music heard in the city space is an important carrier for nonverbal meanings, these capabilities cannot be compared to those of the music listened to in a concert hall. The former functions on a basis of chunks, as it is perceived in



such portions by passersby, even if the musical piece is performed from the beginning to the end. This is an example of splitting the art and its natural context. This fragmentation in reception, as well as the haste and the unconscious consumption of music in the city space, creates the possible danger of aesthetic anesthesia or “anesthetization,” using Welsch’s concept (Welsch 1997: 25).

The Interdisciplinary Department of Soundscape Research is the center of studies on soundscapes, especially of the soundscape of Wrocław, but there are also many educational projects. During seminars for cultural studies and musicology students, problems of the contemporary metropolitan audiosphere, phonic identity of the city, and sound designs for future urban solutions are discussed. The classes are also dedicated to issues such as reconstruction of the historical audiosphere, protection of endangered soundscapes, and workshops in sound therapy as well as taking care of the sense of hearing. The department is also a place for consultation for authors representing various academic disciplines developing their own research projects concerning Wrocław soundscapes.

The first project I want to outline was presented in a bachelor thesis entitled “The Audiosphere of Wrocław” by Kinga Zabawa from the Department of Ethnology at the University of Wrocław<sup>2</sup>. The aim of this project was to register phonic events in selected places of the city and to explain which phonic stimuli are important for common city space users and which are mere background, and explaining the causes for this distinction. The term audiosphere in this project’s perspective was seen, similarly to the Losiak’s concept, as a unique component defining the city’s identity. The author linked certain sounds with the history of a given place, hence in her view it was important to obtain knowledge about past events in the location whose audiosphere was examined. The empirical research included interviews, many of them about past Wrocław soundscapes, observations, and soundwalking with closed eyes. In soundwalking, based on the relation between perceiver and his auditory field, it is less important to track specific sounds of a place (recordings are always more or less radical mediations between the researcher and raw, audible material) than to experience a given place in active listening.

Another project, “Phonosphere – the anthropology of senses,” was carried out by a group of researchers from the Department of Soundscape Research, the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Wrocław, and The Wrocław Philharmonic in cooperation with The School and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://fonosfera.wordpress.com/category/audiosfera-wroclawia-kinga-zabawa/> (30.04.2011).

Education Center for Blind Children. Blind and partially blind people were employed in this project. The research based on the paradigms of sensory and collaborative ethnography, and go-along methods of research were implemented, involving asking the participants questions, achieving empathy with them and, at the same time, observing all of the elements making up the situation. In a broader view, this experience should help in understanding the values of a given place in everyday life, including those who can see as well. A kind of research journal for these studies was started in a blog called “Fonosferra.”<sup>3</sup>

Blind citizens also participated in a 2005–2006 project called “The Invisible Map of Wrocław,” developed by Maciej Bączyk, who graduated from the Cultural Studies Department at the University of Wrocław. The map mentioned in the title is a specific guide to Wrocław created by blind people. The concept that directly inspired Bączyk for his work was the idea of creating photographic images in cooperation with blind people, whose specific capabilities of perceiving the world provide them with knowledge inaccessible to people who can see. The result of the study was the presentation of thirty-one places in Wrocław with images and sounds according to the blind people’s directions, along with their comments. The outcome of this project was published in a trilingual edition with a CD (Bączyk 2006); it was also presented at exhibitions at which descriptions were available in Braille.

It is not just coincidence that the audiosphere of Wrocław attracted the researchers’ attention. The degree of differentiation of the city space is much higher than in other Polish cities of similar size. The plan of Wrocław is typical for old European cities, with its concentric urban structure. Situated in the center of Northern Europe, it was an important location during journeys along the continental routes linking north and south, east and west. Today Wrocław is still a city with great ethnic and religious variety that operates as a meeting point for the intermixing of different cultures.

A specific soundmark of Wrocław is the stone paving on the streets and plazas in the old town. The sound of people walking and horses pulling carriages is a connection between the past and modern times. The murmur of water flowing and other water-associated sounds are also distinctive for Wrocław. The city is situated on twelve islands surrounded by the Odra river. The twittering of birds gathering at the river shout even the buzz of traffic in the city center. The sounds of water sprinkling in the numerous fountains dampen the heavy city

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<sup>3</sup> <http://fonosferra.wordpress.com> (30.04.2011).





Fig. 2: Rynek.

noise. These acoustic landmarks comprise familiar, homely sounds, inducing citizens to sense their bond with the city.

Many churches, mostly the old ones, have towers with still-working bells. Their sounds complement the city audiosphere, especially during feast days. During these days the sounds of sung prayer are audible from inside the church walls, with the accompaniment of organs in Catholic and Protestant churches. In sacred buildings there are often concerts which can be heard from outside, enriching the urban phonic space.

Permanent enclaves of musical presence in the open spaces of the city are the central square (Rynek) and Tum Island (Ostrów Tumski), the latter being the oldest historical part of Wrocław. The audiosphere of Ostrów Tumski, which is densely overbuilt with sacred edifices and has limited access for vehicles, has been subject to only minor changes in recent decades; however, the phonic space of the Rynek is quite different in this respect. During the past several years, since the closure of car and tram traffic, the Rynek, one of most noticeable tourist attractions in Wrocław, has become a kind of promenade, with numerous restaurants, clubs, and cafes.

This is the way the blind Jerzy Ogonowski describes the Rynek:

During the day, the Town Square buzzes with noise. Someone plays music through the loud speakers. Sometimes an orchestra or some band plays their music in the middle of the Square. Everything changes in the evening. As you come in to the Town Square, there is this feeling coming over you as if you were coming home. I've been here a few times in the evening. As I come closer I hear this characteristic even murmur coming from all the pubs and cafes there. It's very pleasant to listen to. I haven't found a similar noise anywhere else. As I get closer, the noise gets louder and louder. Now I know I'm in the Town Square.

Our Town Square used to be a rather dull place in the evening. During the day, one would come here to do one's shopping. People would jump off the tram and run to stand in a queue to buy something. Now people seem to walk much more slowly around here as if there were a never-ending holiday here (Bączyk 2006).

Both the Rynek and Ostrów Tumski are now considered by citizens and visiting guests in Wrocław as places that are the most pleasant in terms of the phonic atmosphere. In the seasons favorable for street music, musicians occupy certain places, which then are commonly associated with specific cultures and musical genres. "Wandering" music is played by Gypsy bands, which are the only bands allowed by the city authorities to perform in the whole Rynek area. The western part of the Rynek is a set location for outdoor concerts, which take place during the whole year. In the summer the audience consists mainly of teenagers and young people, but at Christmas people of various ages gather to sing carols and on New Year's Eve massive crowds attend the concerts. On October 1, 2010, six university choirs and three school choirs initiated the beginning of the academic year singing "Gaudeamus igitur." Here, on April 30, 2011, five thousand, six hundred one guitarists played "Hey Jude" in an attempt to set a new Guinness Record. (2010 – 4597, 2009 – 6346). The Lower-Silesia Opera often gives outdoor performances. For example, "La Gioconda" was staged on a river barge in front of the Ostrów Tumski embankment promenade. Among almost forty cyclic musical events taking place in Wrocław, Wratislavia Cantans (the festival of classic music) and the Brave Festival (the festival of traditional music) organized by The Song of the Goat Theater transform the entire city center into one huge concert hall. Any musical events that accompany feasts of different cultures, like Jewish, Ukrainian, French, Dutch or Indian, concentrate here. It is worth mentioning that prewar traditions of outdoor concerts on workdays and holidays have been restored in some parks and gardens, such as the Botanical Gardens, the Southern Park, and the Pergola Promenade at the Centennial Hall.

Fig. 3: Cathedral.



## Conclusion

The soundscape of Wrocław research carried out by faculty and students in musicology, cultural studies and ethnology aims to create the possibility of influencing the shape and quality of the city audiosphere. These efforts reveal growing concerns for the increasingly polluted phonic spaces of modern cities. In addition, such studies should be utilized as specific ways of capturing the history and recording the evidence of a city's cultural identity.

The category that is of particular concern is “music of the city,” which not only constitutes the identity of particular places and groups of people, but also facilitates the maintenance of certain traditions that are conditioned historically, ethnically, religiously and artistically. The attention to it seems to be especially important in the context of the progressive unification of many cultural phenomena. Its presence eases communication, serves interpersonal contacts, and gives the feeling of affiliation to a specific place and to a particular community.

**Sound illustration of Wrocław soundscape:** [http://lidemesta.cz/assets/media/audio/Symphony\\_of\\_Wroclaw\\_spring\\_2008.mp3](http://lidemesta.cz/assets/media/audio/Symphony_of_Wroclaw_spring_2008.mp3) or <http://bit.ly/sow2008>.

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