



Ella Finer

Acoustic Commons and the Wild Life of Sound

How might we think of sounds as resistant materials? What do we learn by studying the means by which sounds escape and resist categorisation and institutional control? How does sound's wildness complicate how knowledge circulates and is preserved? In this library interview, Ella Finer explains how she came to write her book *Acoustic Commons and the Wild Life of Sound* (Berlin: Errant Bodies), a collection of essays following sound's capacity to evade taxonomies and structures of power – from the gallery to the archive to the House of Commons – and open up other possible resistant and radical spaces of listening and thought.

Ella Finer's work in sound and performance spans writing, composing, and curating. Recent works include the essays 'Feminism and Sound' and 'Listening in Common in Uncommon Times' (both 2020) and the projects *her moon is a captured object* (2020, Onassis and Theatrum Mundi) and *Burning House / Burning Horse* (2020, Almanac).

[00:00:14 to 00:00:40] 'Mute Swan heartbeat, recorded by Richard Ridgway on 8th December 1970', courtesy of British Library Sound Archive

[00:00:45] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The book's title is *Acoustic Commons and the Wild Life of Sound*. I wrote an essay probably about two years ago. It was about this idea of a collection of sound being something more like a sonic miscellanea, collection of sounds that don't really fit anywhere and don't really fit to any category – in fact, a kind of anti-category or even anti-discipline. It was an essay responding to a recording of a swan that was part of the British Library Sound Archive's wildlife collection of sounds. It was a recording that had gained this reputation amongst all the sound curators in the Sound Archive because it was so unusual, because it was a swan's heartbeat that had been recorded at such close proximity to the bird by the recordist. There's this note, this kind of behavioural note in the recording that the swan's heartbeat gets faster when it's being stroked by the person who's recording it, and like everyone else I really love this recording. I mean, there is something so unusual about hearing this very, very close and intimate instance of recording a bird, a wild bird, and the swan being called a 'mute swan' – which is the species' name – but also thinking about this really loud sound that is mute to us, inaudible to us in everyday life but made so loud through that process of intimate recording.

So I wrote this essay around this recording of the swan and how this recording didn't really fit or it didn't... It did fit in wildlife but it also was something wilder than wildlife. That's an expression, I guess, that I use in the book to get me through other instances in which this happens, in which sound doesn't fit. So then I started writing or found other instances or scenes in which this was happening, in which sounds were escaping institutions, in a way: the archive, the gallery, the House of Commons.

[00:03:40] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

This is a continuation of work I've been doing since, well I don't know, since formal education, formal higher education, but also just growing up around sounds in a sonic environment of many different kinds of music scenes and voice performances and thinking about sounds that are resistant materials in a way, I guess, and their power to affect change. And that could be societal change or speaking to a political situation – and also on a micro scale or something I guess I'm experiencing now, which is a conversation with a child and what you learn about their voice changing in relation to yours. So these very different scales of sound and growing up in a sonic environment and then going and learning about histories of art and theatre and performance and experimental performance – and sound and



the acoustic always running through it as another mode of approaching the work, I guess, another way of thinking through the work.

[00:05:25] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

The book is about how sound escapes, really, how it escapes control or attempts to manage it, and argues that this is an unmanageable energy and an unmanageable matter. As I said before, it finds these scenes in which sound does escape institutions, buildings. I only realised recently that it's also about how sound escapes buildings in the city, because these are also institutions which have a certain power in the city. They are kind of centric spaces in which people go to find and produce knowledge – so that's the university, the archive, the gallery, the Houses of Parliament – and actually instances in which sound attempts to be managed. Sometimes for very, very good reason, like if we want to preserve this very old recording on a wax cylinder for posterity and someone like Will Prentice at the Sound Archive – who I'm a great admirer of and has been so helpful in this project – would say: 'We never know what people will want to access, so we try and save it all.' And that's the kind of hope and dream of the Sound Archive. My interest also, though, is looking at other modes of preservation. So if a sound escapes category or if it even gets lost, that's not anti-preservation. Is it another form of preservation that's more about the flight or more about a kind of a different way of finding sound again in the future?

So yes, it thinks about this wildness of sound in conversation with an idea of the acoustic commons, an idea which is up for discussion throughout the whole book and kind of shape-shifts continuously through the essays and through considerations of sound as a cultural artefact, as a resource, as something with value, and doesn't offer a consolidated kind of resolved response to what it is but offers ways of thinking through these questions.

[00:08:30] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

I think the book is about how knowledge moves. I think it's about knowledge on the move through and across different fields. And I think it's inbuilt into its methodology and the way that I asked the same questions of different sounds in different contexts – the sounds always resist staying in place. So it moves across fields if we're talking in an academic sense, probably Performance Studies, Sound Studies, Archival Studies, Affect Studies, Gender Studies, Urban Studies. But I think it's also questioning what fields, or the idea of fields, do to knowledge – and this is where I also think an acoustic commons is important because it's asking us to be careful with the knowledge we have. And not restrict it or hold on to it, in a sense, but to be to be careful with the fields we have generously and collectively. Not squander them and work out ways to share, I guess, across disciplines

[00:10:11] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

The structure of the book is essay-based. It's a collection of essays, each essay responding to ideas of how an acoustic commons could be understood through a different scenario or scene. The scenes speak to each other too. For example, the swan in the archive speaks to the voices leaking out of the Houses of Parliament, of the House of Commons, and then almost absurd or surreal moments happen where I imagine a swan being heard in the Houses of Parliament or in amongst the sounds of Takis's artwork in the Tate Gallery. All these sounds then start to resound in different places. It doesn't become fictional but it imagines how we might hear differently, or you might listen differently, if we were all allowed to think of sounds or given a space to think of sounds coming back to us and playing back to us in memory and other places and what they do to each other – almost like dialectical sounds. What are they? How are they speaking to each other? So the essays all speak to each other. And then in amongst the essays are also short reflections on meetings of a study group I brought together in a few different instances throughout the past year called the Acoustic Commons Study Group, where we met in different places in the city: Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park and



Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and the British Library Sound Archives. So it ends with this – [smiling] no, it doesn't end with the British Library Sound Archive. I think of them as three but of course we end in this time, in this time of the pandemic! Actually, as I've been putting the book together in this time of the pandemic and of protest and of ecological disaster, I was asked to convene an Acoustic Commons Study Group online. So I brought back all the participants who'd been part of the Acoustic Commons Study Groups in place in the city, and we all met online in a chat room while listening to this 24-hour dawn chorus, which was set up by Dawn Scarfe as part of Soundcamp – it's actually Soundcamp who I first heard use the term 'acoustic commons'. And in the spirit of the commons, anyone who's interested in thinking about this term, it's like, great! I mean, it makes the term richer. It's not a squandering of a term and 'whose term was it?'. So I hope that this is an offering, as well, back to their to their generosity in hosting me discussing work with them and hosting study groups. So then, of course, the book ends with this meeting online of an Acoustic Commons Study Group, which is a very strange and very rich meeting.

[00:14:15] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

The book has not been difficult to write. It's been challenging to write, because I want to be really clear about a subject that isn't very clear at all. And I want to – not that I wanted to – write in such a way that hopefully I leave space for people to make up some of the thesis in a way, or the narrative themselves. But I also want to be clear enough in my position on all these different subjects, especially as I'm talking about sound in a kind of tricky way, because I'm talking about it as vibratory energy. I'm also talking about it as a material which is an imaginative proposition, to think about it as something you can take and put there. I think that there is something really useful in thinking about it in both ways, because, for example, in a section like the one about the House of Commons where I'm talking about how sound leaks into the House of Commons from outside – the sound of protest – and then becomes embedded in the report, the official report which is verbatim. I'm there! That is so much about the physics of sound and actually how sound can be so forceful that it can move through a wall. If I'm thinking about how the sound of a swan leaves the archive then there's something different, then it's something else that's almost approaching something like a dream world where a swan sings somewhere else in the city for me – through memory or through recall, through daydream. There are these kinds of different methods or modes and that's challenging. It's challenging to keep whoever's reading with me on these different ways I'm working with sound. And I hope I've done that clearly enough.

[00:16:55] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

I'd have to say my favourite part of the book is where I almost discover the swan and discover it wrongly. Because I was just so excited and so in awe of this recording of the swan – as everyone else was at the Sound Archive – and I wrote this response to it. And it resonated with people in a way I wasn't really expecting, and that was also really an honour and a privilege that certain artists really got it and it really spoke to them. One artist, for example, Sheila Chukwulozie – who was doing a residency at Delfina – actually spoke the words as if they were a script of that part of the book. It was an extraordinary experience to hear it out loud in someone else's voice and think this is actually the point of the book in a way. It's to pass something on and to hear it anew and for someone else to kind of own it momentarily. To let go of work and see it play in other places is amazing.

And then the part of the swan's story that I got slightly wrong – which is also why I think I really love this part – is because I imagine this recording in a kind of box of forgotten treasures in the Sound Archive. And in the book I do go into how this could possibly happen. But this wasn't [so], it actually surfaced again in the Sound Archive because it was being digitised. So through this new process of preservation, a need to find a new way to keep this recording alive in the archive, it resurfaced again. It's a recording from the early 1970s. And Will Prentice from the Sound Archive very kindly and generously told me that I had the story slightly wrong. When I started asking him more questions about the archive, as I have done so many times, he said: 'Ella, I'm worried that I'm going to dismantle part of this extraordinary environment that you've set up, because actually some things



have very boring answers.'

In a way, I thought, well this is also part of the book. It's about administration, it's about management of sounds which necessitate things like making a catalogue entry, [where] a detail left off the catalogue entry can plunge that recording into some other space in the archives. For me, that does lots of other things, it sets off lots of other things in motion. Whereas for maybe an archivist or someone else, that's just: 1) annoying, and 2) just poor work on the part of whoever was inputting the data. So yeah, that part about the swan!

Transcription by Nick Awde

Clips Summary

[00:00:16 to 00:00:40] 'Mute Swan heartbeat, recorded by Richard Ridgway on 8th December 1970', courtesy of British Library Sound Archive

Audio available at www.auralia.space/library2-ellafiner/.

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