Sound as a Heritage Object

British Library Sound Archive, London

Report on the second I-Hear-Too workshop, Monday May 18th 2009

Introduction

Damian Murphy, a member of Audiolab and the I-Hear-Too research cluster, opened the day and welcomed participants to the second event in the I-Hear-Too programme, held in the British Library's Sound Archive, and focussed on sound as a heritage artefact in its own right.

Chris Clark of the Sound Archive then spoke briefly about the history of the archive, which, when he first joined thirty years ago, was called the Institute of Recorded Sound. Founded in 1955, he described how it was the result of earlier movements to preserve sound materials stimulated by the loss of material in the 1930s, and was intended as a 'fortress versus deletion and for preservation.' The British Library's archive, like those in Vienna and Berlin, has a focus on music, the spoken word, and environmental sound, and in the last thirty years, as compared with the earlier life of the archive, has become active in seeking out sound and audio files.

Digital Preservation at the British Library Sound Archive

Will Prentice - The British Library Sound Archive

Prentice began by talking briefly about the nature and origins of the archive, which holds around three and a half million recordings, or about 580 hours of audio, with thirty thousand more hours added per year. Of those collected recordings, about sixty per cent is made up of music, thirty five per cent is speech, and the remainder is largely animal noises. About eighty per cent of the sound archive is published.

The challenge of storing this material was the main focus for the paper – principally, how to keep all the different materials accessible in the long term, a challenge answered in the main by keeping and maintaining copies.

He outlined three major changes that have taken place with the move to digital, and the advantages and difficulties that they each have brought to the archivist. The initial move from analogue to digital removed noise and allowed an infinite number of identical copies, but did not remove the need for a universal carrier, and replaced degradation with the possibility of unpredictable failure.

The development of carrier-independent audio data files solved some of these issues, though it also meant that some of the physical information about the source was lost. The approach currently in favour is therefore to treat the audio data files as virtual objects in their own right, with multiple files and different types of information wrapped into a single digital object.

The non-contact surface scanning of early sound recordings for the preservation of audio content.

Martyn Hill, Electro-Mechanical Research Group, University of Southampton

The sound archive project at the University of Southampton, led by Prof J.W. McBride www.archivesound.co.uk , seeks to recover sound from early recordings using non-invasive scanning techniques. Martyn Hill described the processes by which materials that can no longer be safely played by conventional means, such as cylinder recordings and the Edison tinfoil recording of 1877, can be made to give up their data.

Hill described the way in which optical methods can be used to record the surface of the artefact – as well as the challenges posed by these methods, in particular resolution, speed, and measurement range – and then to extract a data file. While the method is still in development, Hill showed that it has the potential to recover full surface maps that will provide numerous data streams, and that will eventually allow for some reconstruction of damaged artefacts.

Renovating historically significant recordings

Jez Wells, AudioLab, University of York

The focus for this paper was Wells' involvement in a project to restore the recordings made by Michael Howard and the group he co-founded, the Renaissance Singers. The starting point was a question about context: what are the other elements of a recording beyond the central audio strand, and how do those elements inform the recording as a whole?

Wells' highlighted the ways in which the idea of authenticity changes over time – Howard's idea of how early music should be performed was controversial at the time, and has since been overtaken by newer re-readings of the 'reality' of renaissance performance. In this context, Wells was interested to renovate, rather than restore these old recordings, that is, to repair and improve, rather than simply strip out 'noise'.

His method, once the best source of the recording is located, is to try to establish what is original noise, and what has been introduced by the process of recording. The aim of this, either through Fourier time-frequency analysis or wavelet time-scale analysis, is a spectral subtraction that re-integrates aspects of the acoustic space in which the recording took place, and improves the overall listener experience.

Interactive Access to Audio Heritage

Josh Reiss, Centre for Digital Music, Queen Mary University of London

The EASIAER project (Enabling Access to Sound Archives through Integration, Enrichment, Retrieval) is designed to build access to sound archives and the heritage experience through an innovative system available through the web and as a client application. Reiss described and demonstrated the work of the project, which uses already digitised content to allow new experiences of interacting with audio heritage content through visualisation software.

Lunch

During the lunch break, participants had a chance to tour the Sound Archive itself and to visit the conservation labs, as well as to eat sandwiches, and exchange ideas.

Superfield (Mumbai)

Craig Vear

The title of Craig Vear's sound theatre piece is drawn from film theory, a term that describes the complete soundscape of a film. Superfield (Mumbai) then, is a work that creates a multiplex soundscape of the city of Mumbai, and allows the listener to see-hear that cityscape in his or her mind.

Made in the wake of the recent attacks in the city, Vear recorded most of the sound covertly, moving through the streets and trying to preserve the sound and context of the experience in order to build a sense of place into the recordings. Though Vear allowed that there are different ways of listening to the piece, whether as anthropology or as political statement, his main concern in making it was to create an imaginary landscape that prompted mental travel, a phenomenological listening that will be unique to each listener.

He then went on to suggest, through a discussion of earlier work in Antarctica, that there might be a role for sound artists in the presentation of heritage – to evoke and transport the visitor, and to embed a sense of place.

Fakes and Forgeries

Nigel Bewley, Operations Manager, British Library Sound Archive

Bewley introduced his talk with an overview of the scale and range of the archive, noting that between seventy-five and eighty per cent of sound output in the UK is deposited with the archive through a voluntary scheme (there is no law of legal deposit in the UK.) He then went on to elaborate his theme, namely, that not all of the sound that is contained by the archive is what it immediately appears to be, either through deliberate forgery or mis-attribution.

Bewley played a number of sound files to demonstrate the different ways in which sound can be deceptive, or ambiguous, including some animal sounds (a walrus beneath the ice, a male bower bird imitating a building site), a recording made at the wrong speed, some very early recordings (including the earliest known extant recording, of Au Clair de la Lune) and the purported voices of several historical figures (including Queen Victoria and a less convincing Oscar Wilde.)