

LT: Embodied Memory and Field Recording as Compositional Practice in the Age of Generative Audio

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Abstract

LT is a fixed-media electroacoustic work (stereo, 9'58", WAV 44.1 kHz / 24-bit) composed entirely from field recordings collected over a span of approximately twenty years. The sonic materials—footsteps, rustlings, voices, manipulated objects from childhood games—function as embodied traces of situated cognition, encoding spatial, gestural, and affective memory within their spectral and temporal microstructure. The compositional process operates through sculpting, layering, and transfiguring these recordings in Ableton Live, treating the acoustic field as a site of lived knowledge rather than a source of extractable data. In the context of current generative audio paradigms, where sound synthesis is increasingly decoupled from bodily experience and environmental awareness, LT proposes an alternative compositional stance grounded in first-person auditory memory and the irreducible specificity of acoustic environments. The work invites listening as a traversal of invisible paths between the documented and the imagined, the biographical and the shared.

1 CONTEXTUALIZATION

The *musique concrète* tradition, inaugurated by Pierre Schaeffer in the late 1940s, established the radical premise that any sound, once recorded, could become the raw material of musical composition. Schaeffer's concept of the *objet sonore*—the sound object apprehended through reduced listening, stripped of its causal and semantic associations—opened a vast compositional territory that has been explored and expanded over more than seven decades (Schaeffer, 1966). Subsequent theoretical frameworks, most notably Denis Smalley's spectromorphology, provided analytical tools for describing the dynamic spectral and morphological behaviour of electroacoustic sound, emphasising the gestural and energetic qualities that connect sonic experience to embodied perception (Smalley, 1997).

In parallel, the soundscape composition tradition developed by R. Murray Schafer, Hildegard Westerkamp, and Barry Truax foregrounded the ecological and relational dimensions of sonic environments, proposing that field recordings carry layers of cultural, spatial, and temporal meaning that resist abstraction (Truax, 2001; Westerkamp, 2002). Unlike the Schaefferian imperative toward reduced listening, soundscape composition invites contextual listening—an attention to the situated, referential, and autobiographical resonances of recorded sound.

More recently, research in embodied cognition has provided a neuroscientific and philosophical framework for understanding how auditory memory is inseparable from bodily experience. Sounds are not stored as abstract data but as multimodal traces that encode the spatial, proprioceptive, and affective conditions of their original perception (Leman, 2007). This perspective aligns with the phenomenological tradition in which listening is understood as an active, corporeal engagement with the world rather than a passive reception of acoustic information.

LT is situated at the intersection of these trajectories. It draws from the *musique concrète* practice of sonic transformation while retaining the soundscape tradition's commitment to the referential and ecological dimensions of recorded sound. At the same time, it engages with the discourse on embodied cognition by treating field recordings as irreducible traces of lived, corporeal experience. In the current landscape, where generative AI systems can synthesise sonic material without any grounding in physical environments or bodily gesture, this position carries particular relevance: LT asserts the compositional value of first-person acoustic memory as a form of situated knowledge that cannot be replicated by data-driven synthesis.

2 METHODS

The source materials for LT consist exclusively of field recordings made by the composer over a period of approximately twenty years, using portable recording devices in a variety of acoustic environments. The recordings span domestic and outdoor spaces, urban and rural landscapes, and include a wide range of sonic phenomena: footsteps on different surfaces, rustling of materials, voices captured in informal contexts, manipulated objects associated with childhood games, environmental ambiences, and resonant architectural spaces. No synthesised or sampled sounds were used.

The compositional process was carried out entirely within Ableton Live. The collected field recordings underwent extensive transformation through a combination of techniques drawn from the electroacoustic tradition: granular synthesis, time-stretching, spectral processing, convolution, and layered superimposition. These operations were applied not as automated procedures but as deliberate gestural acts—each transformation decision was guided by attentive listening and by the composer's embodied memory of the original recording context. The distinction is significant: in this workflow, the transformation of sound is an extension of the bodily act of recording, not a computational operation applied to an abstract signal.

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The formal structure of LT is organised in contrasting sections, each characterised by distinct spectral densities, temporal scales, and degrees of recognisability of the source materials. The macro-form follows an arc that alternates between passages of high density—where multiple sonic layers merge into complex, immersive textures—and more transparent moments in which individual sound objects emerge with greater clarity, inviting the listener to engage in referential listening. This alternation produces a perceptual oscillation between immersion and recognition, between the dreamlike matter of transformed memory and the indexical presence of the acoustic document.

The spatialisation was conceived for stereophonic diffusion, exploiting panning, depth positioning through reverberation and filtering, and dynamic spectral distribution across the stereo field. The final mix was rendered at 44.1 kHz / 24-bit PCM, with a total duration of 9'58".

3 DISCUSSION

LT raises questions that resonate with the thematic focus of AIMC 2026 on mediated musicianship and the generative turn. In current generative audio systems—whether based on neural audio synthesis, diffusion models, or large-scale generative architectures—the production of sound is increasingly decoupled from physical environments, bodily gesture, and autobiographical experience. These systems operate on statistical distributions extracted from large corpora, generating plausible sonic outputs without any form of situated cognition or environmental awareness.

LT occupies a deliberately opposite position. Every sound in the work originates from a specific place, a specific time, and a specific bodily encounter between the composer and an acoustic environment. The compositional process—listening, selecting, transforming, layering—is itself an embodied activity, shaped by the memory of the original recording act. In this sense, the work can be read as an implicit argument for compositional practices that preserve the link between sound and lived experience, at a moment when that link is increasingly attenuated by generative technologies.

This is not, however, a technophobic stance. The transformations applied to the field recordings make extensive use of computational tools and digital signal processing. The critical distinction lies not in the rejection of technology but in the insistence that sonic material should retain its connection to the embodied and environmental conditions of its origin. The field recording, in this framework, functions not merely as acoustic data but as what could be termed an *auditory engram*—a trace of perceptual experience that carries corporeal, spatial, and affective information irreducible to its spectral content alone.

The work thus contributes to the ongoing discussion within the AIMC community about alternative conceptions of intelligence in music. If dominant AI paradigms model musical creativity as pattern generation from distributional data, LT suggests that another form of creative intelligence operates through the accumulation, selection, and transformation of personally situated acoustic experience—a form of knowledge that is, by definition, non-transferable to a computational agent.

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