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A phenomenological experience of sound. Notes on Francisco López

Makis Solomos

MUSIDANSE (University Paris 8)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the output of sound artist Francisco López by examining his music (or soundworks), his writings, and his performances. Unlike electroacoustic music, which develops its own sound matter, López's works chiefly stem from field recordings. However, this does not entail documentation or soundscape composition: while the origin of the sounds is often recognizable, the emphasis tends to be on immersion inside the sound-in-itself. Such autonomization of sound nullifies the representational level and expands listening – which is pivotal for López, who in his performances seeks for “profound listening” – into a phenomenological experience of sound. This experience, which sets apart significations, references and associations, enables us to rediscover the world and thereby reconnects us to an ecological dimension.

KEY WORDS

Francisco López; sound art; acoustic ecology; phenomenology and ecology of sound.

INTRODUCTION

As of the late 1980s, Francisco López's name has been circulating among aficionados of a certain type of experimental music, although his impact is just as powerful among artisans of sound arts. López himself prefers the term “sonicist” to “musician” (López, 2003). He is highly prolific: his catalogue from the early 80s until 2014 comprises 326 numbered opuses (cf. <http://www.franciscolopez.net>), some of which are simply named *Untitled* followed by an opus number. He is also an outstanding performer, and transmits his music with the aim of attaining what he calls “deep listening”.

The bulk of his musical (or sonic) output derives from in situ recordings. His work would thus also seem to come under the heading of “field recording”. Nevertheless, as we are about to see, he rejects the idea of recording in order to document. Several of his recordings have been made in exceptional natural sites – rainforests or other wilderness areas. It is worth pointing out that he has a background as an entomologist, biologist and ecologist, and that he has taught in universities in Spain and Latin America. His strictly musical origins can be traced to the “industrial” scene of the 1980s. In the early stages of his career, he had been drawn to acoustic

ecology, although he quickly distanced himself, subsequently aligning himself with concrete music and sound-in-itself.

In this article, I propose to broach several questions surrounding his work, drawing examples from his music, performances, writings and interviews.

ON “CONFUSION”: SOUND *MILIEU* VERSUS SOUNDSCAPE

Francisco López’s oeuvre abounds with rainforests: in *Belle Confusion 966* (1996), these are the tropical and sub-tropical rainforests of Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Senegal, Gambia and China: the by now classic work *La Selva* (1998) uses sounds from the rainforest reserve of the same name in Costa Rica; *Untitled 308* (2013) transmits sounds from the rainforest of Calakmul (Yucatán, Mexico)... The wilderness invoked by López is “a world devoid of human presence” as one can read in the notes accompanying the CD *Wind [Patagonia]* (López, 2007). This conjures the notion of the sublime: “Many times I feel nature as a giant ghost with no language and without the slightest interest on me. That’s when it becomes a thrilling experience”, he writes (López, 2001).

The presence of this type of nature is largely due to the fieldwork López had carried out during his research. As he explains in an interview held in 2000:

I’ve been doing research fieldwork in biology for the past 15 years all over the world. This obviously gives me an exceptional chance to experience all sorts of amazing sound environments. [...] The complexity of the sound environments, their natural richness, the unusual pace of the flow of sound events – all these features have influenced my way of understanding the creation of soundworks. I use dramatically slow changes, extreme level dynamics (from the limits of hearing perception to the threshold of pain), an intense focus on broadband sounds and their complexity – all the things you find in the sonic reality of nature (López, 2000).

These assertions shed light on how, in Francisco López’s work, nature is not present as a reference, symbol or nostalgic evocation, but rather through the sound itself. We are close to the universe of Xenakis who, in *La Légende d’Eer*, uses sound itself to stage the spectator, who is much like a sailor lost in an unbridled ocean. And for both composers, the sort of nature that is summoned – wilderness for López, and chaotic nature for Xenakis – explains the sonic quality of their works, which are geared towards noise.

Such nature – being wild and “noiseful” (acoustically speaking), if not noisy – is by definition non-bucolic. This has prompted a profound disagreement between our composer and Murray Schafer (and more broadly, with acoustic ecology), a disagreement that is elucidated in an article published in 1998 entitled “Environmental sound matter”:

The ‘tuning’¹ is basically a ‘silencing’, as if ‘noisy’ were an evil condition in itself and also an exclusive feature of post-industrial human-influenced world [...] The problem is that health or communication aspects are merged and confounded with aesthetic judgement. Besides this, many natural sound environments are quite noisy (waterfalls, seashores, certain tropical jungles...) and the sonic steady-state condition is a very common feature in nature (regardless of the noisy or quiet character of the environment) (López, 1998).

¹ Reference to the title of the book by M. Schafer (1977).

Francisco López thus loves what Murray Schafer detests: “lo-fi” soundscapes, i.e. noiseful, brimming with (sonic) “confusion”, and has sometimes even used the term “Beautiful Confusion”.

While several of Francisco López’s works convey sonic environments from nature, other works originate from urban sonic environments. The common denominator is their character: these urban pieces tap into the city’s wilderness, i.e. situations and spaces left to themselves, without any human beings: *Warszawa Restaurant* (1995) reproduces sounds of an empty restaurant; *Untitled 119* (2001) utilizes an aircraft’s takeoff; *Buildings [New York]* (2001) conveys machines, elevators and various other sounds that are as intimate to a city as are the sounds of *La Selva* to a rainforest; *Untitled 284* (2011) is based on mysterious sounds that – as we learn from the CD cover – were recorded in Lisbon, to cite some of the works for which López indicates his sound sources. As he puts it: “I’m just as fascinated by the sonic atmosphere of subway tunnels and the breathing of empty buildings” as by a rainforest (F. López in Peer, 2002, 15).

López’s oeuvre does not juxtapose these two types of recordings – natural and urban settings. They are treated in an identical fashion: like long moments of immersion, intended for deep listening, moments during which the listener is not asked to discern specific sounds, but to apprehend the work globally. Consequentially, these recordings do not consist of *soundscapes*, to use the term from acoustic ecology, but of *sonic milieus*. If this is how Francisco López prefers to call the sounds he conveys to us, it is because one *delves* into them rather than *contemplating* them head-on. If “confusion” (and lo-fi) comes across, it is because the aim is to heighten the sensation of belonging to a sonic *milieu* by way of immersion, and not to foster contemplation. Whereas the notion of *soundscape* will always be linked to visual perception and its analytic implications, the notion of sonic *milieu* more aptly describes the synthetic mode of listening.

SOUND-IN-ITSELF

The fact that López prefers synthetic perception (and thus listening) over analytic perception (closer to vision) explains why his recordings of natural environments differ from those made by bioacousticians. As López himself explains:

At a first level of approach to *La Selva* I’d like to emphasize its departure from traditional bioacoustics, which is a common reductive interpretation of nature recordings. This discipline focuses on capturing the sounds produced by different animal species, mainly for identification purposes. [...] In *La Selva* there is not such an intentional discrimination; the sound-producing animal species appear together with other accompanying biotic and non-biotic components of the sound environment that happened to be there when the recordings were done. In this sense, there is no purposeful *a priori* distinction of foreground / background (López, 1997).

The same difference applies to the magnificent field recording by Chris Watson, which seek to capture the “hidden detail” (cf. Bailey, 2009). With regards to field recording in general – beyond criticism of its more trivial and commercial expressions, which depict faraway sound

environments to give you the sense of effortless travel² – López stands poles apart, in his frequent avoidance of documenting his CDs. The above-mentioned works, which could be associated with precisely defined sound environments (whether natural or urban), are rare instances. As we already pointed out, many of the works are named *Untitled* and no reference is provided either in the CD or on the composer's website. Moreover, when the source has been cited, only a general indication is given, far from the precise documentation one usually expects regarding field recordings – such is the case with the “American Trilogy” CD, which includes *La Selva*, *Buildings [New York]* and *Wind [Patagonia]*. When he does actually indicate the sources for the recordings, he specifies that the work can – and should – be listened to without this indication. In response to the remark “You deliberately omit details about your sound sources and any subsequent processes (the majority of your releases are untitled and unaccompanied by text, graphics or anything but the barest of packaging),” López has asserted that the soundwork suffices on its own, and that listener's appreciation does not require that he divulge where the sounds come from, or that he furnish any other information or note of intention: “In my experience, my sound work has generally been able to do that, without much further explanation. A lot of people actually face sound work that way already, they just don't make it explicit” (López, 2010).

There is a strain of idealism in Francisco López: he advocates the work and the sound-in-itself. In his criticism of the field recording, he argues that a recording should not be considered as a copy of reality. Of course, he tells us, “the recordings of *La Selva* have not been modified or subjected to any process of further mixing or additions. In a traditional context, it could therefore be said that this work features ‘pure’ straight nature sound environments,” but we must not lose sight of the fact that, by definition, a recording is not objective, first and foremost because “different microphones ‘hear’ so differently” (López, 1997).

With field recordings, the pretense of making us (re)live a location via its sonic environment is sheer illusion, and even trickery (hyperrealism). So what remains? What remains is precisely the work and the sound “in itself”. This means that when listening to the CD *La Selva*, “what you can listen to on this CD is not *La Selva*; it explicitly doesn't pretend to be so. In other words, *La Selva* (the music piece) is not a representation of *La Selva* (the reserve in Costa Rica)” (López, 1997). One thus listens to a musical work and to sound-in-itself, hence the reference to Pierre Schaeffer's theories on concrete music:

What I'm defending here is the transcendental dimension of the sound matter by *itself*. In my conception, the essence of sound recording is not that of documenting or representing a much richer and more significant world, but a way to focus on and access the inner world of sounds. When the representational / relational level is emphasized, sounds acquire a restricted meaning or a goal, and this inner world is dissipated. I'm thus straightforwardly attaching to the original ‘sound object’ concept of P. Schaeffer and his idea of ‘reduced listening’ (López, 1997).

² López criticizes “the idea of field recordings making you ‘feel transported to the place’, so common in New-Age interpretations of environmental recordings. Sitting comfortably in our favourite armchair – without the heat, the cold, the thirst, the flies, etc. – might indeed be an engaging experience, but certainly of a very different nature than that of ‘being there’” (F. López in Bailey, 2009).

Like Schaffer, López separates sound – sound matter, sound atmosphere, the recorded trace... – from its cause, so as to propose a musicalization of sound. This is why he rejects Murray Schafer's notion of "schizophonia", which criticizes – in the name of ecology – such separation. In López's own words, cited from his 1997 article "Schizophonia vs. l'objet sonore: soundscapes and artistic freedom" which opposes Schaeffer to Schafer:

I will be concise and clearly Schaefferian here. I am professor of Ecology and I have been recording and composing with sound environments since more than fifteen years ago. Although I am quite aware of the obvious relationships between all the properties of a real environment, I think it is an essential feature of the human condition to artistically deal with any aspect(s) of this reality. I believe that what is under question here is the extent of artistic freedom with regards to other aspects of our understanding of reality. There can only be a documentary or communicative reason to keep the cause-object relationship in the work with soundscapes, never an artistic / musical one. Actually, I am convinced that the more this relationship is kept, the less musical the work will be (which is rooted in my belief that the idea of absolute music and that of *objet sonore* are among the most relevant and revolutionary developments in the history of music). The "abstractionism" of the art des *sons fixes* is precisely a "musicalization" and – somewhat paradoxically in this comparison – right the contrary to the abstraction in music, i.e., a concretization. It can obviously close doors in the experiential description of sounds and their sources, but it opens new doors of artistic creation; to me, the latter are much more essential and relevant to the human condition than the former. A musical composition (no matter whether based on soundscapes or not) must be a free action in the sense of not having to refuse any extraction of elements from reality and also in the sense of having the full right to be self-referential, not being subjected to a pragmatic goal such as a supposed, unjustified re-integration of the listener with the environment (López, 1997).

According to Francisco López, music arises from the ability of imagination to break free from reality. It is for this reason that he sometimes has no qualms about aligning himself with the Romantic idea of "absolute music", in order

to enforce a transcendental conception of the strength and possibilities of the sound matter by itself, devoid of any restricting content as a consequence of meaning given to it. What I pursue and defend is a music with open content. The absence of titles or references to the procedures for the making of the music is a necessity within this conception (F. López in Peer, 2002, 15).

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOUND

We've discussed idealism, but this is only in appearance: the bottom line is a criticism of the moralistic positions that sometimes ensue from acoustic ecology, in favor of a defense of artistic freedom and of art's ability to exist by itself. Francisco López's position is ultimately phenomenological in spirit.

As such, when he tells us that *La Selva* is not La Selva (the reserve), but rather the soundwork with the same title, he is not positing a form of transcendence; he is simply rejecting the idea of representation so as to assert the presence, the here and now, of sound. In an article published in 2014 entitled "Music Dematerialized?" he criticizes the still widespread idea that a recording is a representation, a simulation of reality (a rainforest an abandoned building, a concert...). This idea disregards the mediation of technology and overlooks an event of historical-technological significance. In fact:

Along with the semantic, the symbolic, the iconic..., another layer of musical 'reality' sneaked into the sound recordings: the sonic, the phenomenological, the Schaefferian *concrète*. That, and not 'music', is what became materialized for the first time in history. Or, we could say, music... *as heard and memorized by machines*.

Due to machines, “we might experience a revelation: the unfolding of the non-representational layers of sonic reality” (López, 2014).

It is thus not a matter of representing, but of *being*, as López’s soundworks tell us. Once again, we give him the floor regarding the relationship between his scientific research and his music:

Working as a biologist provides me with lots of chances for being immersed in amazing sound environments, which must have an influence on my conceptions and directions in my work with sound. I’m not so much interested in finding out about this as I am in living it. What made me produce *La Selva* was a powerful call to get immersed in such an astonishing sound matter. Contrary to commonly held conceptions, in some essential respects, this is much better attained within the recordings than in the ‘real’ place. What I see and feel in *La Selva* is not essentially different from the rest of my work. If you move in the path from representation to being, you can hardly see such a difference. (F. López in Peer, 2002, 15)

This observation – that one is better off immersed in a sonic environment via its recording than when one is in the actual location of this environment – is undoubtedly fundamental: I believe that it singlehandedly explains all of López’s output. It has to do with *autonomizing* the sonic dimension, which can consequently be isolated from its “cause” (the location) without implying schizoponia.

This autonomization, which nullifies the representational level, enhances the act of listening into a *phenomenological experience of sound*:

I have no interest in ‘representing’ anything specific with my music. I actually have a strong commitment to do just the opposite; that is, to develop a sonic world that is so devoid of meaning and purpose that it can be completely open for individual experience. A blank phenomenological terrain where everyone is compelled to create and move through. (López, 2003)

In a sense, this means creating the conditions whereby each listener –putting into parentheses the multiple layers of signification clustered onto the sounds that are heard, or onto the listener’s subjectivity–, experiences listening as if it were an utterly new experience, creating direct contact between the sounds and his subjectivity.

This experience has to do with the experience of space – here-and-now space, and not representational space:

Sound doesn’t exist until we hear something, and therefore what we call a sound is always the sound-producing source plus the transmission space. This is relatively irrelevant for a symbolic or representational listening mode (like recognizing a familiar tune) but crucial for a phenomenological listening of the actual reality of the physicalized sound. I’m definitely concentrated in the experience of the latter (López, 2004).

López then adds that this is why, at his performances, he seeks to place the audience *inside* the sound rather than in the position of listening *to* the sound:

I position the audience in the middle of a sound field through surround systems, and one of my goals is to give rise to a feeling of being ‘inside’ the sound (instead of listening “to” it), thus transforming the visually-defined space into a space of sound that changes its proportions and dimensions according to the transformations and movements of the sound field (López, 2004).

LISTENING AND PERFORMANCE: THE SENSITIVE

I believe that the most fundamental act of composition or creation is listening (López, no date). Composition or performance are not essential for music creation; listening is. Understanding the consequences of this makes a radical change in our role and our possibilities (López, 2001).

I think music only starts to exist when a listener is creating it through his/her dedication and commitment. Before that, there's only raw sound, regardless of the work and efforts of the 'composer'. Or, in other words, the essential act for the creation of music is not the recording or structuring of sonic material, but its appreciation as a musical entity. Anyone can do that (López, 2004).

In a nutshell: listening, for Francisco López, is the essential act. And listening implies the *sensitive* relationship to sound.

The kind of listening sought by López is listening that decontextualizes sound, that aims to liberate it from its references, in order to be appreciated for its own sake, as we've already seen. The opening paragraph of his 1998 article entitled "Environmental sound matter" is often quoted in CD covers:

Much against a widespread current trend in sound art and the customary standard in nature recordings, I believe in the possibility of a profound, pure, 'blind' listening of sounds, freed (as much as possible) of procedural, contextual or intentional levels of reference. What is more important, I conceive this is an ideal form of transcendental listening that doesn't deny all what is *outside* the sounds but explores and affirms all what is *inside* them. This purist, absolute conception is an attempt at fighting against the dissipation of this inner world (López, 1997).

That is why, as mentioned above, the composer gives very few indications about the source of his sounds or about his intentions, and when he does provide information, he always adds that the work can and should be listened to without these indications. In a similar vein to how Francisco López, when asserting sound-in-itself refers to the notion of "sound object" developed by Pierre Schaeffer, so does he define his view of non-referential listening by eliciting the Schaefferian idea of "reduced listening", an idea intimately linked to the notion of sound object. The sound object is defined by Schaeffer as a sound entity "in itself", in other words, detached from its cause. However, hearing a sound-in-itself is solely possible when listening is stripped of references. It is significant to recall that when Schaeffer defines reduced listening, he refers to Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. The term "reduction" should be understood as the reputed "phenomenological reduction" (or *epoché*) (cf. Schaeffer, 1966 and Solomos, 2013).

Rather than use Schaeffer's term, López prefers to talk about "blind" listening, or "profound" listening, using these expressions indifferently (see also Demers, 115-131). Regarding the expression "blind" listening, we refer to the first paragraph of the article "Environmental sound matter" cited above. Regarding the adjective "profound", the following is an excerpt from an interview that discusses *La Selva*:

With this piece, I also try to move forcefully away from the common understanding of environmental recordings as relaxation or virtual commodities. What I propose instead is a more difficult and thrilling experience: a transcendental immersion in sound matter, a *tour de force* of profound listening. The richness of this sound matter in nature is astonishing, but to appreciate it in depth we have to face the challenge of profound listening. We have to shift the focus of our attention and understanding from representation to being. Or, in other terms, we should be free to do this (López, 1999).

This brings us to the subject of Francisco López's performances. We prefer the term "performance" rather than concert because they are genuine *tours de force* of profound listening, to use the composer's term. His article from 2004 entitled "Against the stage" explains why he utterly rejects any elements that are not pure sound, refusing any visual or stage devices. He wishes to do away with the notion of "stage" for the sake of multidirectional listening, and as achieved in previous eras by Xenakis and Nono. This enhances immersion and the phenomenological experience:

Having nothing to contemplate visually in the traditional sense makes possible the departure from frontal sound. As opposed to the directionality of visual elements, sound is perceived coming from every direction. Even the panorama solution implies instant directionality of the perception. Sound perception is simultaneously multi-directional. In a live event this allows immersion, intensified phenomenological experience, to ‘be inside’ the sound instead of listening to it, achievable by very simple and widely available technical means: An array of speakers around the audience controlled from the center of the space (López, 2004a).

López incorporates the Schaefferian word “acousmatic” – hearing without seeing – that the inventor of *musique concrète* had derived from the Pythagoreans. The article “Environmental sound matter” alludes to the hidden cicada paradox:

Many animals in La Selva live in this acousmatic world, in which the rule is not to see their conspecifics, predators or preys, but just to hear them. This acousmatic feature is best exemplified by one of the most characteristic and widespread sounds in La Selva: the strikingly loud and harsh song of the cicadas. During the day, this is probably the most typical sound that naturally stands in the foreground of the sonic field. One can perceive it with an astonishing intensity and proximity; many times you hear the cicada in front of your face. Yet, like a persistent paradox, you never see it (López, 1997).

At performances, steeped in darkness, the audience listens, blindfolded – on several CD covers López recommends blindfolded listening, even at home. Blindfolding your eyes implies not just the impossibility of seeing, but also

the crucial question of commitment to the experience. Being voluntary and optional, the blindfold becomes in this context a tool for transformative listening through acceptance, surrendering, dedication, trust, engagement. And if we are even more resolute and ambitious, a tool for spiritual expansion (López, 2015).

When playing music at his performances, López is in the center; the audience sits in a circle around him and faces the walls (rather than facing the performer as is traditionally the protocol in acousmatic music concerts). His website displays photos of such performances as well as the precise technical requirements. As audience members have divulged, in this type of performance one feels more vulnerable, and one becomes more sensitive (cf. the description of one of Francisco López’s performances: Peer, 2002). It is obvious that by refusing to indulge in representation, and through the performance-practices he has developed, López seeks to make the listener’s body (the listening body) interact with the concrete space, and with the specific location (cf. Esclapez, 2015).

THE EXPERIENCE OF EXTREMES AS TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

The majority of Francisco López’s works derive from recordings. We have mainly cited those involving natural or urban sonic environments. It is also worth mentioning the montages of instrumental samples in pieces such as *Untitled Sonic Microorganisms* (2005, mixing sounds of several musicians under the heading “absolute noise ensemble”), *Untitled 104* (2000, from *heavy metal* samples), *Untitled 275* (2011, piano and electronics) or *With/In* (2012) (“created with original sound matter recorded from body, clothes and immediate surrounding space during ritual whirling by Valentina Lacmonovic”). The wide-ranging origin of the sounds can sometimes be discerned by the naked ear (*La Selva*, 1998; *Wind [Patagonia]*, 2005; *Untitled 244*, 2010; *Untitled 291*, 2011; *Hyper-Rainforest*, 2011; *Yanayacu*, 2014; *Untitled 320*, 2014...), and at other

times is unrecognizable (*Warszawa Restaurant*, 1995; *Belle Confusion* 966, 1996; *Untitled 104*, 2000; *Untitled Sonic Microorganisms*, 2005; *Untitled 308*, 2013; *Untitled 281*, 2011...).

These recordings undergo relatively few transformations. From a purely sound viewpoint, one can discern two major categories. The first category – whether the recordings stem from nature, urban environments or instrumental samples, and whether or not they are recognizable – comprises the significantly greater scope of works using broadband sounds, being often very noisy. They evoke thick sonic textures recalling Xenakis, and sometimes even approach, when there is “beautiful confusion” (see above), a certain type of noise. One can also regard them as being modeled on a waterfall – a model poles apart from the “hi-fi” advocated by Murray Schafer – as René van Peer puts it:

The Kaluli people of the Bosavi area in Papua New Guinea like to go to a waterfall to compose music, according to the prominent ethnomusicologist Steven Feld. This is an outstandingly pragmatic approach to creating music. Waterfalls emit continually shifting sounds in a wide register. Not only is the effect hypnotic, inducing an open and dream-like frame of mind, the sounds themselves suggest to the receptive listener all manner of rhythms and melodic lines. In a manner of speaking, a waterfall embodies any and all conceivable music, and the only thing composers need do in the presence of one is to let their fancy flow along, and then take home what has condensed in their ears.

The music of the Spanish composer Francisco López bears striking parallels to this concept, in more than one sense. As he himself says, he draws his music from the broadband noise that surrounds us in our everyday life. In preparation for his compositions he records sounds occurring in the environment, both urban and natural. He processes and edits these recordings into layers of noise. In his music’s most radical form, the sounds are distilled into long, thick blankets of hiss or rumble. At first hearing, these seem uniform, like the roar of a waterfall. It is when you open up your ears to them, adjusting your perception to a higher degree of sensitivity and concentration, that you start to discern the lively variety between and within these sonic shrouds (Peer, 2002, 10)

The second category comprises works that are very calm, sometimes verging on the inaudible, such as the *Warszawa Restaurant*, 1995 and its empty restaurant. A recent DVD – entitled *Presque tout*, a nod to Luc Ferrari and his *Presque rien* – features around twenty pieces of this type, composed during 1993-2003.

Broadband sounds or nearly inaudible sounds: Francisco López plays with extremes. This is undoubtedly in order to facilitate the listener’s quest for a phenomenological experience of sound: the listener must make an effort to adapt to the sound avalanche or else to the quasi void, and thereby become aware of the act of listening. With the broadband sounds, played very loud, one strives to hear the hidden detail: when asked if his pieces should be reheard or taken as unique experiences, López answers: “I definitely work in a way that would reward repeated, attentive listening. I like detail, nuances and hidden layers of sound events in the sound works. And I do take a lot of effort and time in working out these features in virtually every sound piece I make” (López, 2010). As for the barely audible tracks, the adaptation time can seem longer (on López’s most silent pieces, cf. Hodkinson, 2007, 171-176). For Francisco López, music enables these extreme variations:

When music is a world in itself, the territories are vast and thrilling. We can go from -60dB to 0 dB and feel all what is happening, we can endure deserts and oceans of 10 minutes of silence, we can flow in mountain and abyss crescendos of 40 minutes, we can walk on thin shreds of thin air or be smashed by dense waterfalls and things like that, which I do in my pieces. There’s nothing conceptual on this, but rather an immense spiritual universe of open possibilities, or at least this is what I forcefully try to create (López, 2003).

This experience of extremes is thus above all a *temporal* experience. Whereas Francisco López's earliest pieces are short (the 20 *Untitled* works from 1980-82, go from 20'' to 15'), he subsequently opted for longer durations, ranging from thirty minutes to an hour, sometimes even longer – while continuing to simultaneously compose short pieces. The long durations are more apt at bringing one to a state of profound listening (cf. López, 2010). It is for this reason that the textures evolve only slightly or not at all, unfolding over long timespans until the listener is totally immersed, and they subsequently disappear (rapidly and sometimes even abruptly) to give way to a new texture. With this temporal expansion, and with his acousmatic performances, Francisco López creates the conditions for a phenomenological experience of sound.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: ON ECOLOGY

It is difficult to conclude this overview of Francisco López's universe, which encompasses music and sound art, as well as theory. I would like to simply readdress the question of the sensitive relationship to the world, and more precisely, to nature. We have seen that, when reproached for schizophonia by acoustic ecology supporters, Francisco López answers that *listening* (genuinely) to a sound environment requires isolating it from its strictly sonic dimension, and thus from its cause, from the location where it was recorded. Only then can one surrender to the phenomenological experience which, by putting into parentheses significations, references and associations, enables us to rediscover the world.

Phenomenological reduction is by no means an operation that results in arid formalism: discussing sound “in itself” and opening the way – as Schaeffer had done – to sound morphology, means experiencing the wonder of listening so as to grow aware of our relationship with the world. In this respect, and contrary to appearances, the phenomenological experience of sound is more in line with an ecological approach than is soundscape composition (when its connection to nature is limited to merely identifying the source of the sonic materials). In López's words:

The phenomenological [approach] gives access to a different level; one that is less obvious, less mundane, more concerned with a more profound apprehension of reality, more capable of grasping the enormity of things-in-themselves (hence vastly more *ecological* than the dilettantist clichés we now hear everywhere). And thus it counteracts the perpetuation and the imposition of the epistemological listening program as our only way – some say the only possible way, some others say the only *respectful* way – to access the sonic world (López, 2015).

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