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Abstract

Avec Le Vent (*With the Wind*) is a radio art composition directed, edited and mixed by Jeanne Debarsy, about the story of exile and memories of three Armenian people living in Brussels and Paris. This review is an attempt to describe how the author breaks with verbal discourse to create an experience of transportation for listeners, through the musical use of layers of breaths coming from the characters and the sound effects caused by instruments of wind, such as the *duduk*, a potent symbol of Armenia. It is a poetic approach to the experience of uprooting and the need to return to roots, which is still present today: a story that keeps repeating itself, like the zig-zag of the wind, the waves of the sea... the sound of our breath.

Keywords

Jeanne Debarsy, audio storytelling, radio art, drones, sound filters, duduk, Armenian community, stories of exile

This documentary review is available in RadioDoc Review: https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol4/iss1/9

Listening to our inner breath: the acoustic architecture of Avec le Vent (With the Wind)

by Laura Romero Valldecabres

Title: *With the Wind (Avec le Vent)*

Production: ACSR, Atélier de Création Sonore Radiophonique (Belgium) and Babelfish.

Author: Jeanne Debarsy

Voices and music: Virginia Kerovpyan, Aram Kerovpyan, Vardan Hovanissian

Language: French

Length: 14min30

Link to listen: http://www.acsr.be/production/avec-le-vent/

English transcript is on the *RadioDoc Review* issue home page, as a supplement to this article.

Breathe. Take time to breathe, to listen to your own music. Every time you breathe, you are creating a new frequency, new vibrations inside you, and then, your energy is projected around. Just breathe, because we are alive. It is something we feel, not tell with words. And this exercise is the purpose of *With the Wind* (translation of the original title in French, *Avec le Vent*). As the author says: *in the beginning, there's the blowing, reassuring... Then comes the sound, telling stories...*

Jeanne Debarsy, sound engineer and sound artist based in Brussels, co-founder of Babelfish, works as a sound designer for cinema, scenic arts and music. But the language of radio is finally the language that gives her a greater freedom of action and expression. One of the works for which she created the sound, “Quand la mer se retire” by Aurélie Boudet and Ecaterina Vidick, was awarded the Premio Internacional de Radio Ondas 2018, in Barcelona. Debarsy has recently been awarded Prix Radio SCAM SACD (France-Belgium) for the entirety of her career.

With the Wind is a short-form creation, an intense piece of radio art about three Armenian people living in Brussels and Paris: Virginia Kerovpyan, Aram Kerovpyan and Vardan Hovanissian. They had to leave everything behind, leaving their home but always taking with them the sound of their land. This audio piece is about stories of exile and memories of Armenia beyond words, an invitation to feel their voices differently, crossing the borders of countries and crossing the borders of what sometimes we cannot express with verbal language.

In the beginning, the blowing

At the beginning of the piece, we only listen to a breath. Next, two breaths. Several breaths come from different “bodies”, and therefore, with different lengths and colours of sound. This set of overlapping breaths creates a sea, an ocean, whose waves are always full of different sound nuances. The cadence itself, the rhythm, create the heartbeat of the act of existing. Movement is existence and to live implies the act of movement. Then, the voice of an anonymous woman appears. She is Virginia, an Armenian singer of modal singing who grew up in the USA because her family fled there after the Armenian genocide. She grew up without speaking the Armenian language. Aran, her lover, whom she met on a trip to France, made her discover Armenian singing and the need to reclaim the Armenian language to

maintain a link with its roots. But this is not information that Virginia tells us directly. She talks with a few words about poetic acts: the act of smelling, the pleasures of breathing, of hearing the melodies, about the poetry of belonging to something which is abstract, the beauty. How can we go so far into something that flows so freely and universally, even though it connects us with something that is concrete, that holds us to something smaller, like a specific identity or the memory of our roots? This big thing is belonging to our inner music, to the nature of sound.

After the voice of Virginia, other sounds begin to take part in this breath composition: wind chimes, birds, sea waves... And then, the voice of Aran, her lover, appears. They talk, with short sentences, calmly, about breathing and singing techniques. Next, they sing and their voices blend into this composition with the form of wind: a wind created with the air that goes through their bodies while singing. Debarsy cut out studio fragments of breaths, breaths and words from each of the three musicians and made a cushion layer to create a narration by the sound.

In general, she decided to start from blowing, in all of the artistic process: the blowing of the breath and the blowing that passes in different wind instruments. And to play with the fluidity of this blowing to segment, jerk, break, rebuild. In parallel, the words are also jerked and gathered. The author experiments with recordings of flutes, human breaths and wooden elements used as sound effects, giving more depth to the dramaturgy. This way of working, of looking for meaning and glimpses of truth in the sound elements least visible, makes me think of Clarice Lispector in *A Hora Da Estrela* when she wrote “the facts are sonorous but among the facts there is a whisper. It's the whisper that impresses me”.[1]

[1] *Os factos são sonoros mas entre os factos há um sussurro. É o sussurro o que me impressiona.*

The characters

Aram and Virginia are a couple from the Armenian diaspora living in Paris. They both teach Armenian liturgical singing to an audience as much involved in the Armenian cause as simply passionate about singing in general. Debarsy took part in a few singing workshops that they gave in Brussels. The Armenian liturgical singing is a modal song: a continuous drone and then, musical patterns that are placed gently on it. This is a completely different approach to music, compared to occidental tonal music.

The third character in this piece is Vardan, an Armenian musician who lives in Brussels and is a sublime *duduk* player. The *duduk* is a thousand-year-old instrument built with apricot wood (another Armenian symbol) and endowed with an extraordinary vibrato that gives it an evocative and unmistakable song. “It is the symbol and soul of Armenia”, emphasises the musician Djivan Gasparyan in an interview for a Spanish journal, “we conceive it as a metaphor for the human being because it contains a deep sense of spirituality. Its sound expresses the often bitter past of my people”.[2]

Debarsy confesses the sound of *duduk* moves her enormously, “it contains at the same time a great melancholy, a great wound and at the same time a luminous power”.[3] The Armenian diaspora, spread throughout the world, try to continue to live its rich cultural heritage by expanding this special sound. A sound that we could consider therapeutic, with enormous powers to renew vitality, like the simple exercise of breathing deeply. A sound that for the Armenian community symbolises resilience, healing and the transformation required to move on.

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[2] Interview with Djivan Gasparyan in *El Pais* (2002): https://elpais.com/diario/2002/01/05/babelia/1010189182_850215.html

[3] Interview with the author, Jeanne Debarsy, by email, November 2018.

The *duduk* as a character and the constant cushion as a space

"When I play the duduk, it tells the story of Armenian People," says Vardan. Once the *duduk* appears, it does not leave the narration. And this is also the intention of the author to tell from sound, to reduce the verbal discourse. The *duduk* is used as the place where all these stories and feelings are transmitted together. Virginia and Aran create harmonies with the *duduk* and this constant *cushion* or drone represents also a space, placing listeners directly inside, inviting them to an immersive and spiritual experience. Some authors even relate the phenomenon of using drones, reverberation and sound cushions, with a connection to the spiritual world or to the interior of the individual: *"*The sound of a very large single room with hard walls will evoke the spiritual sense of being in a cathedral. Or a multi-rhythmic echo will denote a labyrinth-like space, confusing and complex (...). When Paul Horn played in the Taj Mahal, he was in a dialogue, playing the room more than the flute" (Sonnenschein, 2001). In this case, Virginia, Aran and Vardan are playing with their own bodies, they used their blowing and breaths in an expanding way in order to come back to the origin.

We can feel something similar when we hear a voice reverberated in a church, in a cave, or even in a scene of a film. An experiment conducted during my doctoral research about spatial dimension, applied to audio fiction stories and through media-psychology methodologies, demonstrated that the use of elements like sound filters or sound effects used in an environmental way, created a sound 'cushion' that increased the level of vividness of mental images, listeners' attention, recall and their transportation 'inside' the story (Romero, 2017).

I personally love these words from celebrated sound editor for films, Walter Murch, that I learned while studying cinema at university. I have never forgotten them:

> There is a similar mystery hidden in our own biology: four and a half months after we are conceived, we are already beginning to hear. It is the first of our senses to be switched on, and for the next four and a half months sound reigns as a solitary Queen of the Senses. The close and liquid world of the womb makes sight and smell impossible, taste and touch a dim and generalized hint of what is to come. Instead, we luxuriate in a continuous bath of sounds: the song of our mother's voice, the swash of her breathing, the piping of her intestines, the timpani of her heart. (Murch, 2000)

This is how *With the Wind* could be described: a bath of sounds in a journey into memories. “I wanted to dive into it”, says Virginia in a moment when the sound of the *duduk* is transformed in a form of explosion that could symbolise the return to the uterus, to the origin: the only place where maybe humans feel safe.

Memories and the sound of resilience

Without memory we would live in a deep mental darkness. As radio scholar Séan Street notes, “human memory begins with the sound of a closing door as we leave home for work, or the kettle switching off at the end of its boiling; the simple daily sounds of our lives are recollectable through sound before there is a picture” (Street, 2015: 37). The three characters tell some details of their own memory and their life, but above all, they are reviving a much larger, more communal memory that not only involves the Armenian people but all the people that have been or are oppressed. Because, as Vardan says, *it's a story that repeats itself all the time:*

Fragment from English Script

H: It's not only my story! There are a lot of refugees who left their country, and it's about that.

Choir: It's about that... playing with the fire...

H: And you see, up to now, it's a story that repeats itself all the time.

The repetition of the same song, the same story throughout history, is also part of the structure of the narrative. The composition full of layers of breaths and blowing, coming from the characters' bodies and from the instruments, begins to acquire a suffocating, oppressive tone. A repeating pattern appears: blowing on the ground, the soil removed, as if we were listening to someone digging a hole. The texture of the sound is interesting: the hard soil falling in contrast to the air, light and flowing. This atmosphere, together with some sentences they said – *the pain of our people, a sad story of our country, give some sense to this all* - are cut and united as a collage, reinforcing the idea that this constant destruction does not make any sense.

Fragment from English Script

A: We are humans, not even small dots in the universe… And it's up to us to give some sense to this all.

Then, the sound collage hosts some strong bursts of these breaths, blows from a fierce wind, the wind that runs both in their bodies and in the body of the instrument, in all directions. Some words are dressed with sound filters like delays and reverberations. The composition begins to deform, to acquire electronic nuances, to become almost noise, devoid of understanding. And, during this passage, in the mixture of sound layers, appear some words - sometimes on the left,

sometimes on the right, but always in a distant sound shoot, keeping the verbal information behind the sounds - the three voices talk about the repetition, in time, of the same story: exile. That repetitive song (the song of genocide and war) becomes unbearable to our ears and to our lives. Debarsy deforms the layers of sound, maybe in an attempt to represent the atrocious noise of war, of the lack of freedom.

Fragment from English Script

*Choir: Repeats itself all the time… and it's not over… 25 years… it's not over… it's not easy…*economical stories… repeating all the time….

(…)

Choir: Playing with the fire… economical stories… repeating all the time…we know that song…

"All we want is: live normally, like human beings", after these last words pronounced by Aran, the author tries to recover that normality, that humanity, leaving listeners alone for more than a minute with the *duduk* and liturgical song until the end of the piece. That means a non-verbal conclusion. Although it may be risky, or too long for listeners to hear constant music and only this music for more than a minute, this ending acquires the importance of life: the metaphor of resilience, of the cure. It is in this moment where the *duduk* becomes the character: it is that same song as always, but now, there is no noise.

This documentary piece is edited from a poetic conception. The meticulous technique of collage, taking words and phrases isolated from the interviewees, could be interpreted as an excessive decontextualisation. However, this is a piece that breaks the verbal speeches without losing the emotional weight of the experiences of the protagonists, obviously supported by the fact that the characters are

musicians with a strong sensory awareness of sound. *With the Wind* is not only a story of exile, it is also a listening experience of the most intimate thing we can give ourselves and others: our own simple heartbeat on Earth, our breathing and movement, in order to continue the struggle. Because this is our story too.

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Laura Romero is an audio maker, sound producer, voice actress and researcher in communication based in Valencia, Spain. Between France, Spain and Colombia, she has worked for media such as Mediaset, Cadena SER, M21 Radio, Onda Cero, À Punt Mèdia and Radio en Construction in Strasbourg. She experiments with different narratives, audio fiction, sound documentary and sound arts, working in different languages and countries. Her short piece produced in French, *Un matin tranquille,* won first prize in the *60 Secondes International Radio Contest of Montréal* (2016).

In 2018 she produced, in co-authorship with the journalist and radio maker André Cunha, the audio documentary in four episodes *Puzzle de Fronteras,* a sound journey around the diversity of the Iberian Peninsula and the new waves of nationalism in Catalonia, Spain and Europe. As a researcher, she holds a PhD in Communication (2017), focused on the study of spatial dimension of sound, specifically to improve mental imagery and transport the listener inside the story. She has given specialised workshops in universities such as Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Uniminuto in Bogotá, Universidad Jaume I in Castellon and Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. She has been speaker-participant in meetings in different places, including Festival Longueur d'Ondes (Brest, 2016), Jornadas de Podcasting JPOD (Málaga, 2016), Encuentro Nacional de Radios Comunitarias de Colombia (Bogotá, 2017), Radiodays Europe (Vienna, 2018), International Feature Conference (Prague, 2018). She is the founder of the first Spanish online review of radio art *Radioimaginamos.org* (2009-2017) and produced a podcast focused on radio art between 2010 and 2011, called *El Primer Sentido* (*The First Sense*). She was invited to be co-editor of this international issue of *RadioDoc Review* (2018).
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