

Soundings

The Newsletter of Sound Strategies

February 2009



info@sound-strategies.co.uk

www.sound-strategies.co.uk

<http://sound-strategies.typepad.com>

[Our Hidden Side](#) - What we do elsewhere. Michael Spencer
[Bleeps and Burps](#) - The art of noise and what it tells us. Andrew Peggie
[Sound Strategies News](#) - 'We're legitimate' and B2B Marketing

For more information contact the Managing Director, Michael Spencer at
michael.spencer@sound-strategies.co.uk

Our Hidden Side

Looking through back editions of Soundings (we are now almost half-way through our second year!), it's interesting to see some of the topics we have covered; from brands to banks, from shouting to silence, from experiences in-store to those on the internet. Nonetheless there has been one slight omission. We seem somehow to have missed out on the fact that although Sound Strategies is still a communications consultancy, its 'music arm' still operates very much at the delivery end, and in some unusual guises

Michael Spencer has been in Spain working with one its symphony orchestras, looking at how it can be better positioned within its community, particularly through its education and outreach work, while Andrew Peggie has been in Rotterdam managing the creative content of some unlikely sound masses: a [gamelan](#) from Suriname, a group of female drummers from the Cape Verde Islands and an Antilles-style marching band plus 150 trombones

Both of these projects have at their core an intention to re-sensitise people to the infinite variety of sound by bringing music styles into conjunction with new listeners and participants. Re-sensitisation is also at the core of our corporate work, enabling executives and creatives to develop a more fruitful and articulate relationship with audio media.

In our 'Breaking the Sound Barrier' sessions (see [January '09 Soundings](#)) we introduce delegates to a variety of creative and interpretive tasks using sound, often in conjunction with other media, demonstrating how the emotional, symbolic and referential connections we make with sounds often merge together in complex ways. We then provide linguistic and analytical tools to enable them to perceive and discuss the effects of different soundtracks both in multi-media and in real life.

One might imagine that this might be second nature to musicians, but this is not always the case. In Rotterdam, an international trombone festival, [Slide Factory](#), realised that its international remit should perhaps move outside the rather limited world of trombone playing and connect with other musical styles. Hence Andrew Peggie's World Tone Journey, which blends the music of trombones (both classical and jazz) with that of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Just as important as the music itself will be the encounters between musicians from diverse backgrounds.

In Spain, the [Orquestra Simfònica del Vallès](#) (Catalonia) came up with remarkably similar thoughts: how to reach out to a 21st century multi-ethnic community? Michael Spencer will be helping them over the next three years to reach out into the musical roots of Catalanian

traditions, tying them into the core work of the orchestra and the cultural, corporate and commercial life of the region.

We pride ourselves on maintaining this sort of hands-on experience and knowledge and we find it gives us a unique perspective on the diverse ways in which people interact with sound

Michael Spencer

Blog comments to <http://sound-strategies.typepad.com>

Bleeps and Burps

One of the big problems with electronic sounds is that there is no extrinsic musical lexicon or lingua franca associated with them. Acoustic instruments create complex emotional associations by virtue of the instrument itself: the sounds of a piano, electric guitar, trumpet or steel pan are indivisible from their images. The character of the music being played is affected by an individual's prior associations with the instrument and its players.

Ever since the early days of the [theremin](#) and the sine wave generator, composers working with purely electronic sounds have struggled to create equally rich associations in the absence of characterful instruments. Pre-digital instruments have at least had a few successes; the Mini-moog synthesizer and Hammond B3 organ among them. But in these days of virtual digital instruments, when the music tends to emerge from computer speakers, almost no associative qualities are possible. Which is why DJ-based clubs need light shows to help fill in the referential background.

However, there does exist an instinctive language of electronic sounds, albeit rather basic and lacking almost all emotional nuance. We can hear its emerging syntax most strongly in computer games and amusement arcades; but there are signs of emerging meaning also in video media, computer functionality, websites and of course techno dance clubs. The sounds themselves struggle for syntactical meaning and tend to depict crude yes/no situations, perhaps denoting pace (usually excitement or chill-out), menace or humour.

However, integral electronic sounds are an increasingly important part of any interactive digital device, be it a fruit machine, wii device or computer. Why? Because of the interactivity itself. Humans are hard-wired to speak to one another. If the relationship is with a machine, then part of that relationship self evidently has to be via sound. We pick up and process audio signals in parallel with visual cues in ways which make the experience more immediate, meaningful and realistic. Sound signals give pace and (ideally) emotional context to the process. This is also the case with audio signals on a computer screen or web page

But electronic devices on the whole function silently. Usually we have no idea what is happening or how long it might take. Speak to mechanical engineers or experienced drivers and they will tell you how important it is to listen to the noises a machine (or car) makes. Indeed, it is often by this means they can detect a potential problem. Their relationship with the machine is as much through sound as through any physical interaction.

Personal computers have available audio signal menus which attempt to replicate in sound some of the processing activities of the computer. But the trouble is there is often a very tenuous link between the sound emitted and the task being performed (or being aborted, more often than not). And because we have to learn to associate a series of bleeps and burps, emitted often apparently at random, with different processes, the psychological effect is more negative than positive. They take us by surprise but are all over before we can answer back.

Viewers of American TV series such as CSI might be amazed and envious at the high level of □ conversational □ skills the make-believe lab computers have. They seem to carry out audio running commentaries on their processing in ways which far exceed the abilities of any computer I've ever used. It is interesting because the sounds are effectively continuous. So in theory the users would learn to understand what is happening by detecting changes in the tones. Computer games and slot machines operate on similar principles.

However, the random tones often used on websites (such as rollover sounds or click-sounds) create negative effects partly because of their sudden and unexpected appearances. They exist without a context. By the time the user has worked out where the sound has come from it is too late to attribute any meaning to it.

With the exception of computer games no-one (to our knowledge) has yet created a website in which the sonic environment is both continuous and interactive □ in the same way that the act of driving a car modulates the sound of the engine itself.

When this eventually happens - and doubtless it will - then perhaps a more extended lexicon of electronic sounds will begin to emerge. In the meantime, Sound Strategies will continue to examine the bleeps and burps for emerging meanings - and pass on the results here.

Andrew Peggie

Blog comments to <http://sound-strategies.typepad.com>

Sound Strategies News

- A small, but significant milestone for Sound Strategies. We recently received notification from the Trademark Authority that 'Sound Strategies' has achieved status as a registered trademark
- We were featured in the February edition of [B2B Marketing](#) both online and in hard copy
- February has also seen us extend our work with the agency [TBWA](#) and in particular with one of their clients

Our Expertise

Sound Strategies conducts rigorous analysis of the impact of sound in corporate and brand communications enabling clients to make effective and sustainable decisions that reinforce corporate identity. We design and deliver bespoke training workshops for brand teams.

If you would like to discuss how you could use sound and music to be more effective, please contact Michael at michael.spencer@sound-strategies.co.uk

Sound Strategies Associates

BrainJuicer

<http://www.brainjuicer.com>

Elias Arts

<http://www.eliasarts.com>

Hear Here!

<http://www.hearhere.org.uk>

Hertz:Radio

<http://www.hertzradio.com>

Open Ear Music

<http://www.openearmusic.net>

For back editions of Soundings, [click here](#)

If you have a point of view or topical information about any matters relating to the use of sound in the real or virtual worlds and would like to contribute a short article, please email the Soundings editor, Andrew Peggie, at andrew.peggie@sound-strategies.co.uk

If you wish to opt out from this newsletter please send a response to: soundings@sound-strategies.co.uk Including 'unsubscribe SOUNDINGS' in the subject line.

Management Board: Michael Spencer (MD), Bernard Carey (Chm), Dr. Reginald Watts, Edward Freeborn (Fin Dr)

Advisory Board: Dr. Michael Bull, Andrew Peggie, Ronna Porter

Corporate Communications: Joanna Philpotts

Registered Office: The Lodge, Little Hickmotts, Marden, Tonbridge, Kent TN12 9DB. Company Reg. No. 557977