

Andrea Zarza

Sonic time capsule



Concept and Composition - Andrea Zarza

Field Recordings - Andrea Zarza - **Alto Saxophone** - Artur Vidal - **Alto Saxophone** - Caroline Kraabel - **Beats Programming** - Verity Susman - **Female voices** - Angeles Oliva & Toña Medina - **Male voice** - Ciaran Harte - **Mixing Engineer** - Nathan Fustec

"But if a record is a time capsule and a phonograph is a time machine, they are so in an unaccustomed sense. A record is a sculpted block of time, repeatable at the owner's whim. That block may have been carved from another time and place (though only live recordings are carved in one piece) and so may be a document or record of its quarry." Evan Eisenberg

The composition *Sonic Time Capsule*, specially commissioned by RRS, has its point of departure in an instruction manual entitled *A Sonic Time Capsule* written in the English language and available at

<http://archive.org/details/SonicTim...> The manual is oriented towards a practical outcome - creating a sonic time

capsule - but also attempts to analyze this way of history making and its consequences. A time capsule or time vessel is a collection of objects brought together to communicate one's experience of the present to a future finder. The selection of contents is a complex problem involving limitations of durability, size, representativeness, and interpretability. However the final problem - notifying the future listener as to the existence, location, and possible interpretation of time capsule contents - may be the most perplexing.

Inspired by Alvin Lucier's *North American Time Capsule*, *The Crypt of Civilization* and the NASA's *Golden Record*, the instruction manual asks readers to decide through active listening what sounds of their present they consider representative enough to enclose in the time capsule. For this purpose, it encourages them to examine and transform

their attitudes as listeners: "By imagining that the receiving end of our sonic message is a distant, unknown, being, we are forced to step outside our self and our time and convey our experience of these in their uttermost strangeness. If each participant embodies this fantastical distant listener as an alter ego, we might rid ourselves of our familiarity with the present and begin to listen to it and perform it with wonder." (p. 8, *A Sonic Time Capsule*)

The sound composition *Sonic Time Capsule* was thus created with the future listener mind and hopes to generate the experience of puzzlement and wonder that a future listener might have upon discovering a time capsule from the past. What will the future listener gauge about the present by listening to its encapsulated sonic traces?

The piece opens with a female voice reading a sequence of call numbers in the Spanish language. The future listener is unaware of what these call numbers signify and if the sequence has just begun or is a continuation of a larger, ongoing, sequence. The call numbers are being read from a sound effects catalogue and each call number designates a recorded sound effect. The titles of these are read by a male voice, which appears at different intervals throughout the piece. At times, a second female voice can be heard overlapping the first. This occurs when there are two different call numbers per sound effect.

In an archive, a call number is given to an item once it enters the archive, crosses the archival threshold. This marks its historical birth, its induction into the historical realm. The three voices represent chronometric time and are layers of historical time that the future listener has to transverse in their passage towards the nucleus of the time capsule. The electronic beat pattern, which appears at approximately 1 minute and 12 seconds, is built around the three voices to accentuate the predictable and rhythmic qualities of measured time. We hear the male voice read: "Trains, train, trains shunting, trains, trains, trains, goods train, goods train passing, train depart with whistle, train sounds, screeching train brakes, trains, ship siren, engine room, trains, table tennis match, tango, tanks, tank, tank, train, trains, trains, trains..." evoking sensations of transport and movement in the future listener's mind. The sound of water dripping in the background is a reference to Clepsydra, one of the oldest time keeping devices.

In the first 4 minutes and 30 seconds of the piece, the future listener is confronted with the indexical traces of sounds: call numbers and sound effect titles. The sounds themselves are inaudible but the titles of the sound effects evoke the ideas of these sounds in the future listener's imagination. The scattered fragments of the catalogue create an incidental narrative of a lost past left to be deciphered by the future listener. The future listeners may ask themselves: What kind of a present is one that sounds like this?

Improvisers Caroline Kraabel and Artur Vidal were invited into the recording studio to donate contents to the sonic time capsule. Their contribution was guided by the following questions: What sounds of the present would you like to preserve? What would you like to store away for the future listener? Is there a sound of the present that should only be listened to in a few decades?

They each spent thirty minutes in the studio improvising their contribution to the time capsule. I was also present in the studio in order to preserve their playing and make it repeatable for the future listener. Recording is a protection against the decay of sound, a way of collecting and owning someone else's time.

Artur Vidal's improvisations eclipse into the piece at 4 minutes and 30 seconds and mark the first descent towards the center of the time capsule. He wanted to store in the time capsule the act of uncovering and discovering a sound, which meant he would also include in the capsule how the musician listens to himself during the improvisational act. Field recordings of wind turbines, boilers, engines, ventilation systems, were used to create a room tone for the interior of the time capsule. These sounds were chosen for their constant character - they continue to sound despite human activity much like a buried time capsules exists underground independent of their future finders. At 9 minutes and 23 seconds the male voice appears again and we can hear him reciting: "Rain, rain, radio monologue, radio news in Russian, rain, rain, heavy rain, rain drips, rain, recorder test, recorder, car leaving...". The future listener is further descending into the time capsule whilst Clepsydra ticks away - we are nearing the center of the time capsule

where fragments of Caroline Kraabel's improvisations have been stored away.

Caroline Kraabel had been out busking before coming into the studio. Inspired by the sounds of transit, which she 'absorbed' during this time, her improvisation relays some of the patterns, frequencies and rhythms heard on a street in London in December. Her playing is an expression of the present moment, captured live in the recording studio, and then edited to fit into the time capsule. This point in the piece is the geographical center of the time capsule: the future listener's ear is now peering in to hear the sound of the pure present.

At 22 minutes 08 seconds the two female voices reappear and the chronometric structure begins to build up again, combining the same elements the piece began with. More fragments of the sound effects catalogue are read by the male voice: "Fairground organ, fairy effect, fairies effect, fairground crowd, fanfares, fanfares, fanfare, formation of fighters one diving, fanfare in open, fanfares, farm noises, farm noises geese and ducks, farm yard, farm yard noises, farm yard noises, farm yard motorbike, fast feet, fast feet transport..." and "Fire, fire and water, fire, flames crackling, outside fire alarm, fire and ambulance, fire, fire burning, fire engine, horse-drawn fire engine, fireworks, fireworks, fireworks, fireworks...". *Sonic Time Capsule* ends in a similar way to where it began suggesting that a circular chronometric movement is what surrounds the present.