

Recalling the River – The River Soundscape in the Site-specific and Social Practice of Tolka Nights

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ABSTRACT: Tolka Nights was a series of public events that explored the social, historical and ecological significance of the River Tolka, Ireland. Produced by an interdisciplinary team of six artists, the events took place in three distinct sites along the river in September of 2015. This paper outlines the project with particular focus on the aurally-engaged activities of two members of the artist team: Matt Green's field recording, film-making and sound installation practice and John D'Arcy's participative choral workshops and performances.

KEYWORDS: public art, site-specific, social practice, collaborative, interdisciplinary, field recording, location sound, film sound, sound art, sound installation, voice, improvisation.

1. Introduction

This paper concerns Tolka Nights, a series of public events that took place at three distinct sites along the River Tolka, Ireland over three consecutive nights in September 2015. The events comprised sound, film, performance and discussion, and explored the river's significance: as an ecosystem, to communities, to diverse histories, and to regional and national current affairs.

Tolka Nights emerged through the individual and collaborative practice of six artists of varying disciplines brought together specifically for the commission: Matt Green (project lead), Sven Anderson, John D'Arcy, Jennie Guy, Conan McIvor and Stuart Sloan. The artist group undertook an extensive programme of site-specific engagement that included onsite documentary and ethnographic activity; archive research; consultation with the river's residents, users and maintainers; choral workshops; and film-making.

Tolka Nights was commissioned under Ireland's Per Cent for Art Scheme, a government initiative that assigns one percent of the budget of any public development to arts commissioning. This project was commissioned within a flood defence development programme managed by the Office of Public Works (OPW). The commission was devised and supported by the OPW, three council boroughs through which the river Tolka passes (Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council and Meath County Council) and Create, an Irish arts agency specialising in collaborative arts in social and community contexts.

This paper commences with an overview of the context of the commission followed by an overview of the artist group's engagement and research process, and delivery of the three public events. The discussion then focuses on the practices of Matt Green and John D'Arcy of the artist team, whose work and activity engaged the river soundscape. The paper outlines Matt Green's location sound and field recording activity, and the application of his Tolka sound archive in the soundtracks of four films based on expeditions along the Tolka in search of the river's rarer and more elusive wildlife; as well as within a sound art intervention in the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin. The paper also describes the development and performance of Tolka Chorus – a collaboration between John D'Arcy and local amateur singers that involved sound-walking, vocal improvisation, environmental sound, and curation of literary texts regarding the Tolka.

2. The River Tolka

The Tolka is one of three main rivers that pass through the city of Dublin, the others being the Liffey and the Dodder. The Tolka flows from west to east, rising north west of Dunboyne in County Meath, and travels thirty kilometres through North Dublin culminating at Dublin

Bay. Over its course, the river passes through farmland, woodland, parkland, residential and industrial districts.

The name Tolka is derived from the Irish for ‘flood’. Because of the Tolka’s flat gradient and unsympathetic development, the river is prone to flooding and causing severe disruption and damage when such occurs. Large scale flooding is expected every 50 years. Flooding on a smaller scale occurs much more regularly.

Tandem to the OPW’s flood defence work over the last decade, the three council districts through which the Tolka passes have invested considerably in improving the health of the river and extending and enhancing the river’s green spaces. A highlight of Dublin City’s work is the production of a four kilometre ‘greenway’, an off road cycle route through newly developed parkland and constructed wetlands¹. In 2011, after an absence of more than 100 years, wild salmon were found to be living in the Tolka once more. This was attributed to both the OPW’s removal of weirs and each council’s effort to decrease pollution levels.² Unfortunately, pollution continues to be a problem for the river and this alongside flooding and crime in the river’s parklands continues to dominate the press and public image of the river.³

The river catchment in the Fingal county district in particular has undergone much development in the last quarter century, predominantly within Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ period (mid-1990s to mid-2000s). Within this district, in addition to the introduction of green space, developments have also included new road networks, a major retail park, several industrial sites and housing. The demographic of the river reflects that of Dublin as a whole: over the last quarter century, the river’s populous has grown and diversified considerably.

3. Overview of Tolka Nights

3.1. The Process of Tolka Nights

The artist team were awarded the commission in March 2015 after a three-part application process. They adopted a site-specific approach, creating work in response to engagement with the localities and communities of the Tolka. The group’s approach did not centre upon final production outcomes but rather a strategy for interdisciplinary collaboration and action at the river, and with the river’s communities. Each artist devised their own programme of community and/or institutional engagement based upon their specific skills and interests. Each artist was paired with another of the group to carry out and document their activities. This documentation was then fed into the production of three public events.

1. For details of the Tolka Greenway: <http://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/content//RecreationandCulture/DublinCityParks/VisitaPark/Documents/Tolka%20valley%20Greenway.pdf>.

2. For details of salmon returning to the Tolka: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/salmon-return-to-the-tolka-river-after-100-years-26776249.html>.

3. In 2015, a detergent company pleaded guilty to discharging detergent in to the Tolka that resulted in the death of an estimated 5000 fish (<http://www.thejournal.ie/river-tolka-fish-kill-2252276-Aug2015/>).

Matt Green's artistic engagement primarily comprised field-recording activities and a series of recorded river-walks with individuals whose work or recreation encompasses the green spaces of the river. Stuart Sloan accompanied Green to carry out video documentation of the river-walks. Sloan also researched and collated archive broadcast media pertaining to the river.

John D'Arcy facilitated Tolka Chorus – a series of choral workshops with local amateur singers that involved improvisation with environmental sounds and song-making based on archive texts about the river. These workshops were documented by Conan McIvor who, in his project worked with local heritage services to research art and literary texts inspired by the Tolka.

The third pairing in the artist team, Sven Anderson and Jennie Guy, consulted civil servant stakeholders in the river's maintenance, including the OPW's 'Engineer-in-charge' of the Tolka's flood defence program. They further explored governmental publications on the Tolka, and drew comparisons with other rivers around the world.



Figure 1. Tolka Nights event poster.

3.2. The Three Events of Tolka Nights

In a collaborative response to the individual and group activities that formed the research and engagement process stage, the artist team produced three public events (Figure 1.) comprising audio-visual presentations and live performances. Each event's distinct format was informed by the form and function of the specific riverside venue in which it was presented.

The first event, a Tolka River-themed pub quiz, took place at The Grasshopper Inn, Clonee, Co. Meath. Quiz teams were made up from the communities and organisations with whom the artist team had liaised and collaborated with during the earlier process stage. The quiz questions were derived from knowledge shared by these communities and organisations, and each group donated a prize that was awarded to the winner of a specific quiz-round. This format provided an opportunity for groups to meet and share their unique branches of knowledge, and artefacts, in a celebration of the river that unites them. The evening was enriched with food and drink produced from local riverside edibles and audiovisual production throughout the pub featuring riverside sounds and images captured by the artist team.

The second event features an outdoor screening of a programme of original films shown on a large screen erected in Tolka Valley Park, near Blanchardstown. The films screened at this event were produced by the artist teams, both individually and in their collaborative pairings. The subject and material of each film was derived from each artist's activity in the process stage. The event also included a coloured illumination of the river and a performance of Tolka Chorus, the choral group assembled by D'Arcy.

The third event commenced with a symposium at the College of Amenity Horticulture, situated by the Tolka as it passes through the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin. This featured artists and architects speaking about their work with rivers both in Ireland and further afield, programmed by Anderson. The symposium was followed by a sound art intervention featuring a multichannel sound installation and mobile sound hunt devised by Green and Anderson.

4. The Soundscape in the Four Wildlife Films of Matt Green

4.1. Green's Engagement Process

Over a six-month period prior to the three public events, Green travelled the full length of the Tolka in an effort to document the river in sound and video from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives included those of the river's wildlife, inhabitants and users, as well as hard-to-reach perspectives such as underwater, which Green sought to acquire through use of microphone and camera technologies. During most of Green's time spent at the river he was accompanied by Stuart Sloan. Sloan captured still and moving image documentation whilst Green recorded sound.

Green programmed his documentation of the river as a series of expeditions for which he would draw up maps and involve local guides whose work or recreation concerns the river.

One of these expeditions included a three-day cycling trip travelling back and forth along the river, engaging in prolonged periods of listening and sound recording activity (Figure 2.). The most significant of Green's interactions were a series of eight organised walks with individuals knowledgeable of the river's flora and fauna; a focus of Green's from the outset. The documentation of four of these excursions were compiled in to four films that were screened at the second event of Tolka Nights.



Figure 2. Matt Green fishing for sound at the Tolka.

4.2. Four Wildlife Walks

Green and Sloan undertook four expeditions along the Tolka that were specifically in search of the Tolka's rarer and more elusive wildlife. Each expedition was guided by a local river enthusiast knowledgeable of the animal being searched for. Sean Meehan led the search for bats, Brian Carruthers for kingfisher, Barbara Freitag for Otter and Des Chew and Christy Emmet for trout.

In each of the four walks, Green observed and shared in each guide's interaction with the river environment as they pursued a particular animal. Green also encouraged each guide to verbalise their activity as they went. This annotated each walk with further information, anecdote and opinion pertaining to the wildlife, the river and its environment. Green and his guides were fitted with a wireless lavalier microphone to capture their conversations. Sloan, acting as cameraman, would occasionally join the conversation but most often stayed behind Green and the guide, recording them from a distance. Use of the wireless microphones as opposed to a boom microphone, meant Green was more mobile and the job of recording was less tasking, hence Green was able to stay in better contact with the guide.

Furthermore, Green and Sloan found that ‘indirect’ surveillance of the guide elicited less nerves and restraint than, for example, a straight-to-camera interview.

Green conducted the four wildlife walks with reference to the ethnographic practice of ‘walking with video’ that Sarah Pink both termed and defined (Pink 2007). Pink comments that ‘walking with’ can “bring us closer to understanding how other people perceive their multisensory environments, constitute place through everyday practice and live ‘in their bodies’” (Pink 2007, 246) and that video “provides us with a tool that can enable embodied communication about, empathetic understandings of and representations of other people’s perceptions of their environments” (Pink 2007, 245).

4.3. Four Wildlife Films

Four films were produced to illustrate the wildlife walks undertaken by Green, Sloan and their invited guides. Each of the four films includes selections from the conversations that took place as the river and its parklands were explored, and recording of the sights and sounds both encountered in these journeys and evoked by them.

Each of the four films seeks to impart the pleasurable experience of the expedition it recounts. The films attempt to communicate a sense of travel and of time spent in close connection with the river and river environment, as well as the splendour and serenity of each setting. Moreover, the films attempt to convey the warmth and humour of each guide and his or her enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, the animal being searched for, and for and of the Tolka, the home of this animal.

Elsewhere (Green 2011, 17), with reference to phenomenological geographer Edward Relph, Green has stated that much of his artwork seeks to adapt or enhance an individual’s ‘sense of a place’ (Relph 1976, 63) and lists a number of ways of doing so. One of the methods outlined by Green is to change the individuals’ orientation and/or ‘intention’ (Relph 1976, 43) towards a place. With the four films, Green once more employs this tactic: Through inspiring interest in an animal, awareness that it inhabits the river and knowledge of the factors of its habitation, Green seeks to encourage the audience to visit the river and its parklands, and once there, to engage more deeply with the environment in a manner approaching that of the wildlife guides. This tactic recalls the motives of psychogeography. Christina Ray and David Mandl comment that psychogeography is “about exploring or experiencing the physical landscape in new ways: trying to find what’s marvellous, life-affirming, or at least exciting about seemingly mundane places – or transforming them to make them more marvellous, life-affirming, or exciting”.⁴

4. Quote taken from an interview with Ray and Mandl in the build up to 2nd annual Psy.Geo.Conflux conference, which they co-organised. The interview is here: http://gothamist.com/2004/05/10/christina_ray_dave_mandl_psygeoconflux.php. This quote can also be found in (Pinder, 2005, 391).

4.4. Sound in the Four Films

At the forefront of the soundtrack to each film is the voice of each guide. The guide's speech was captured close up, close to the body, with little treatment in post-production. As a result of this sound quality and the accompanying images, each film adopts a first-person perspective for much of its duration and this perspective is that of the guide. This supports the aim of the audience empathising with, and taking on to themselves, some of the guide's 'ways of being in the world' (Pink 2008, 181). In addition, clearly in two of the films but arguably in all of the films, there are points in which the 'point-of-view' and 'point-of-audition' (Chion 1994, 90) are from the perspective of the pursued animal. This is done both because of the aesthetic of their perspective and to encourage the audience to empathise with this animal and their ways of being the world.

In addition to the dialogue, the soundtrack contains river ambience and activity. These elements were derived from field recordings taken by Green within the course of his engagement with the river. The majority of these recordings were captured along the route of each guided wildlife walk but at a later time. Prominent in each soundtrack is the sound of walking through undergrowth and upon dirt tracks and stony banks as well as wading through water. In terms of texture, these sounds are true to the environments explored but they are presented exaggerated, 'hyper-real' (Chion 1994, 99). As such, these sounds foreground the sense of travel and give dynamics, rhythm and interest to each soundtrack. Furthermore, the sound of footsteps appears exaggerated in an effort to express the multisensory nature of walking.⁵

The walking sounds serve an additional purpose. These sounds are applied across scenes to help build the sense of one coherent journey across space and time. Conventionally in film including documentary, music would usually serve such a purpose as well as provide dynamics, rhythm and interest. Music is also often employed to convey the emotions of characters or give colour to scenes.⁶ In the four films, there is no music (at least not in a classical sense). In the place of music, there is the ambient sound of the river environment comprising primarily the sound of flowing water. This sound is regarded as being relaxing and symbolic of peace, vitality, good health and purity.⁷ The river ambience imbues each film (and indeed the real environment each film depicts) with these qualities.

Green's four films share the approach of the documentaries analysed by Strachen and Leonard (2015). In these documentaries, the soundscape "has a crucial role to play and cannot be understood simply as a complementary bed always in service of the other elements"

5. With regard film, Marks comments "the audiovisual image necessarily evokes other sense memories" and "through intersensory links: sounds may evoke textures; sight may evoke smells" (Marks 2000, 213). Pink quotes Marks in a similar discussion of the capacity of film to illicit sense impressions beyond those directly engaged by the medium (Pink 2015, 172).

6. "Music provides continuity, covers up edits, facilitates changes of scenes, provides mood, offers entertaining spectacle, allows for narrative interludes and montage sequences, and comments on action" (Ruoff 1992, 229).

7. The qualities of flowing water mentioned are raised throughout (Symmes 1998).

(Strachen and Leonard 2015, 166). For Green's four wildlife films, the soundtrack was drafted first and images were added to this. Constructing the films in this way reversed the usual hierarchy in which "image, dialogue and music are prioritised over locational sound" (ibid.). Sounds were selected on their own merits rather than because they best suited an image. Moreover, in the four films, sound and image do not always align, which Strachen and Leonard suggests encourages the audience to "listen aesthetically" (Strachen and Leonard 2015, 174). Additionally, sound alone commences and ends each film and throughout each film there are moments in which the screen goes black, which places further emphasis upon the soundtrack.

4.5. Film Screening in Tolka Valley Park

The four films were produced for the second event of Tolka Nights – the outdoor screening event at Tolka Valley Park (Figure 3.). In addition to Green's four films, three other original films produced by the artist team were shown: Anderson and Guy's *Before the Flood* (2015); Sloan's *Troubled Waters* (2015) and McIvor's *Lady of the Tolka* (2015). Green's *Kingfisher Spotting with Brian Carrathurs* (2015) opened the event, and his remaining three wildlife films were sequenced in alternation with those of the other artists. Green's kingfisher film struck the group as an appropriate opening given it's beginning with an invitation from Carrathurs to walk to the river. The remaining three films because of their position in the programme, their short length and positive tone, appeared like adverts for visiting the river, a welcome byproduct of the event programming that empathised with Green's intentions of ecological advocacy.

Each film in the programme approached the Tolka differently. Whilst Green's four wildlife films mostly avoided negative aspects of the river, these were at the fore in other films. Whilst Green's films were naturalistic and affable, other films such as that of McIvor were much more abstract and assertive. McIvor described his film *Lady of the Tolka* as a 'trance film' informed by durational video art practices. McIvor's soundtrack was comprised entirely of ambient music: a large contrast to the aesthetic of Green's wildlife films.



Figure 3. Film screening in Tolka Valley Park.

5. The Sound Art Intervention of Event Three

The third event of Tolka Nights consisted of a symposium and a sound art intervention entitled ‘river amplification’ on event promotional materials. The symposium was held in the College of Amenity Horticulture situated in the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin. The river amplification was staged in the gardens across a knot of pathways leading away from the college and crossing the Tolka. The river amplification comprised a river illumination, a multichannel-channel loudspeaker installation and a sound-hunt accessed through use of handheld radios distributed to the audience. The intervention took place at twilight, a time when the gardens are usually closed to the public. The intervention provided opportunity for the audience to interact with each other, the gardens and river; participating in the production of a sonic artwork that augmented, annotated and animated the river’s soundscape.

5.1. Multi-channel Sound Installation

The installation comprised four large speakers mounted on subwoofers that were placed in a clearing by the river situated directly beneath the college (Figure 4.). Two of these speakers faced away from the river towards a grassy incline that runs alongside the college. The remaining two speakers faced towards a footbridge beneath which there is a weir and through which the Tolka runs. Played through the speakers was a composition of ten water textures which Green recorded within his expeditions along the river in the months prior. Each texture first faded in and then out on the first pair of speakers, those facing the grassy incline away from the river. As a texture faded down in the first pair of speakers, it subsequently faded up in the second pair. As the texture faded down in the second pair of speakers, a new

texture faded up in the first pair. The composition included various river flows; underwater sound; wading through water; a thunder storm; and light woodland rainfall. Some textures were big, bold and bassy whilst others lighter, softer and airier.

The speaker stacks were capable of emitting very loud sound (they had in the week prior to Tolka Nights been used at Electric Picnic, a 50k capacity music festival). Whilst the speakers did not emit volumes at anywhere near their capacity, the river sounds were amplified much beyond their natural level. From the grassy incline, certain textures such as the underwater texture provided an intense and visceral experience: the sound strengthened by reverb engulfed the listener and the bass was strong enough to be felt throughout the body. This experience was intended to produce a feeling of immersion, as close as one might get to being submerged in the river without getting wet. Moreover, at such times, the river was impossible to ignore. The river appeared to demand attention, something which in the past it has lacked.

From the footbridge, towards which the second pair of speakers faced, both projected sound and the real river were audible. The river at this point runs with pace down a weir and is resultantly quite loud. At this location, the projected sound served not to amplify but augment. The textures accented the real river sound and over time transformed this sound, as though the river were shifting through its many guises; or carried by the river were images of itself from further upstream and further back in time.

Away from both the incline and bridge, the projected textures could be heard to move to and fro across the river, and reverberate throughout the undergrowth and canopy of the gardens. At such a vantage, the installation served to articulate the surrounding geography, express the scale of the river's influence and unify the radio projections of the sound hunt.



Figure 4. Sound Installation in the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin.

5.2. Sound Hunt

Through use of short range radio transmitters, twelve sound zones were dispersed across a knot of paths in the botanical gardens. At the exit to the college, which led down to the main installation area, the audience were provided with radios through which the dispersed sounds could be accessed. Participants were also handed a somewhat cryptic list of titles for each sound zone and informed of the radio frequency at which all zones were audible. Most participants undertook the walk in a group or pair, either each with their own radio or sharing.

Audible in each zone was a sound composition derived from the media and recordings of the two previous events or the raw materials of the artist team's process stage. The compositions included edited versions of the soundtracks to the films shown the previous night; a recording of the Tolka Chorus; a recording of the first event's quiz; the final episode of 1960s TV soap opera 'Tolka Row'; and various field recordings.

Green devised the sound hunt with support from Anderson. Green's previous work includes a number of what he terms 'mobile sound walks' (Green 2011, 2). These comprise sounds mapped across space that can be accessed through GPS-enabled devices equipped with headphones. On this occasion, the more primitive technology of radio was selected for a number of reasons: Firstly, radios are everyday devices and have made familiar the concepts of tuning 'in to' signals, and being 'in range' or 'out of range'. Radios also signify a condensing of time and space: through the radio one can access the sound of far away activity with accuracy and immediacy. Hence, one may more willingly perceive the radio installation as a 'heterotopia' (Foucault 1984), a space in which other spaces and times coexist and can be accessed. Secondly, radio static resembles the broadband frequency spectrum of water sound. This supports the illusion that one is tuned to and listening to the river. Thirdly, the sound hunt was inspired by Green's bat hunting on the river in which a device much like a radio was employed to access the ultrasonic calls of the bats. Green found the experience of hunting out bats (hearing the first call through the static of the bat detector) thrilling and sought for the sound intervention to be similarly pleasurable. Indeed, one zone comprised a composition of bat calls. Fourthly, the radios came with speakers so sound could be played out loud. This enabled participation in the event's soundscape, encouraged sharing of the experience and gave the event more of a communal atmosphere – attempting to provide a sense of community, which is a known quality of the radio medium (Truax 2001, 10).

In addition to locative media practices (Hemmet 2006), underpinning and informing the radio installation was, as with the Green's films, psychogeographic methods. Like Debord's alternative map of Paris (Pinder 1996), the request for the audience to search out sounds was a request to inhabit and engage with the site and river differently and perhaps go on to regard the site and river differently: the river's significance to the gardens and its catchment more evident, the activity of listening to and at the river more likely. Cristina Kubrisch's

‘electrical walks’⁸ and Janet Cardiff’s ‘audio walks’⁹ make similar requests of their audience and were an inspiration to the sound hunt.

6. Tolka Chorus

Tolka Chorus was a series of riverside vocal workshops coordinated by John D’Arcy. Through the processes of critical listening, musical composition and vocal improvisation, these workshops invited local residents to engage with both the soundscapes of the river and a selection of archive material relating to the river’s environmental and social histories. These activities facilitated the participants in their development of a songbook with an accompanying animated score for public performance as part of the second event of Tolka Nights.

D’Arcy’s approach in Tolka Chorus had been previously developed in the production of a series of participative choral events presented under the moniker Belfast City Choir. These included site-specific performances by organised ensembles (*Letterkenny and Moving Song*, 2013) as well as participative actions by members of the public (*On the Move*, 2013; and *Literary Lunchtime*, 2014). The events of Belfast City Choir were each led by D’Arcy’s printed verbal performance instructions for non-expert vocalists. These instructions encouraged individual and group exploration of a specific site through engagement with environmental sound, literary texts, oral histories, performative ritual, sound poetry, musical improvisation, acts of détournement¹⁰, and inclusive performance practices. It was the aim of Tolka Chorus to engage a group of residents in Dublin and Meath with these elements as a means to explore their local riverside environment.

Tolka Chorus invited participants from a number of schools, colleges, choral societies and community groups in the river’s catchment area. From this, a group of amateur singers was formed. Each participant had experience with classical choral music as well as personal memories of the river and its histories. This project gave the majority of the group their first experiences in sound-walking, group vocal improvisation, and graphic and verbal musical notation.

The workshops and performance were shaped by a dialogue between D’Arcy and the participants about how the group might explore the sounds of the river, its communities and histories through vocal performance. Drawing influence from site-specific sound works such as Susan Philipsz’s *Lowlands* (2010), a public installation based on folksong, and Brian

8. For details of Kubrisch’s electrical walks: http://www.christinakubisch.de/en/works/electrical_walks.

9. For details of Cardiff’s audio walks: <http://cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/>.

10. The politicised subversion of existing productions and media through adaption and manipulation of recognisable characteristics – observed and categorised in the context of Situationism by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman (Debord and Wolman 1956). In the works of Belfast City Choir, detourned elements include classical performance contexts, Western counterpoint and harmony, and the original literary text sources.

Irvine's street-opera *Things We Throw Away* (2014); it was decided that the group should perform vocally at riverside locations so as to immerse themselves and the audience in the locale.

The group identified two key methods of vocally sonifying the river: (1) vocalising riverside environmental sounds in mimicry and sound poetry; and (2) giving voice to the river's social and ecological histories in lyric and melody.

6.1. Vocalising Environmental Sounds

In order to recreate environmental sounds, the group underwent a variety of vocal exercises that compartmentalised some discreet parameters of vocal sound production such as pitch, timbre, amplitude envelope, etc. These exercises were influenced by the inclusive music-making practices of John Stevens and Brian Dennis (Stevens 2007, Dennis 1975). The group practiced attending specifically to the timbral details in their vocalisation as they explored forms of sound poetry: paralinguistic sounds, non-semantic vocables and glosolalia. The sounds emerging from the group formed something of an acoustic lexicon as they began to discuss and imitate local environmental sounds – both in literal and abstract interpretations.

To augment this activity, participants conducted walks along a section of the riverside in Mulhuddart that took in areas of lush vegetation, forest, suburbia and arterial roadways. The group engaged in critical listening exercises influenced by Pauline Oliveros's *Deep Listening* (Oliveros 2005). This prompted further consideration of the distinct parameters of individual sounds as they emerge and propagate in the wild, as well as the density and texture of the overall environmental soundscape. At certain points where pathways intersected the river, the group stopped to perform echoes of the natural soundscape. Upon returning to the indoor workshop space, the group listened to a selection of the local animal calls and underwater soundscapes recorded by Matt Green. This was an opportunity to listen 'deeper' and observe timbres, melodies and textures that hadn't revealed themselves during the daytime walk in Mulhuddart.

The group then vocalised a short musical piece structured as a riverside journey along the River Tolka. As a visual guide the group looked to a series of large-scale maps of floodplains along the river. This improvised performance contained a variety of aural textures ranging from sparse rural scenarios to dense industrial dirges. Over the course of multiple performances, the group began looking at the illustrated flood plains as a graphic musical notation. The changing colour and span of the flood extent at different points in the river's journey towards Dublin Bay could be interpreted as changes in pitch, volume and timbre for individual voices, or the overall density and texture of the group's soundscape. Using the floodplain maps as a graphic score for a vocalisation of environmental sound would ultimately become the undercurrent of the group's live performance piece.

6.2. Giving Voice to the River in Lyric and Melody

In addition to vocalising the environmental sounds of the river, the group felt it was vital to give voice to the river's social and ecological histories in the form of spoken and sung texts. The group consulted a range of source material including news archives collected by D'Arcy, historical literature collected by McIvor, and oral history statements collected by Guy. The participants grouped these into categories of ideas and issues that they felt were pertinent. These included pastoral tranquillity, industrialism, ecological pollution, the riverside Battle of Clontarf (1014), and personal memoirs of riverside landmarks.

The group listened to musical examples where archive material was used as lyrics and in response began performing their own text sources in forms including verse-structure, improvised melodies, mash-ups, drones, echoes, chants, and graphic melodic notation based upon year-on-year Tolka flooding data. The group used verbal music notation as a means of defining these musical adaptations of the archive text sources. It was hoped that the plain language of verbal music notation (as opposed to traditional Western musical notation) would provide a comparable starting point for performers of all levels of musical experience, as well as engender opportunities for improvisation.

The group chose seven lyric sources, each married to a distinct compositional and performance mode. 'It's Not Flashy' adopted the typographic musical notation informed by Hugo Ball's *Karawane* (1916). Here, the dates of flooding occurrences were printed in different sizes relating to their devastation – this would inform the performer as to how aggressively they should chant the texts aloud.

'Best Kept' and 'Cool Water' invited melodic improvisation, echoes and tonal harmonies for the performance of the archive texts about positive aspects of the river. 'Best Kept' described Dublin's National Botanic Gardens ("In the bustle of the city majestic trees buffer against the noise and fumes"); whilst 'Cool Water' described the shared experiences of diverse communities living at riverside accommodation in Mulhuddart ("Old and New Irish honouring the differences [...] similar customs [...] similar cultures [...] similar traditions"). In contrast, the verbal musical notation for 'Waste of Water' asked performers to recite quotations from news articles about Tolka ecological disasters as "a polluted flow of sound", and to "contaminate the lyrics of others".

It was hoped that the verbal notation for performance would evoke a range of visual, oral and aural processes and thus prompt critical responses to the texts undergoing recitation – an opportunity for an individual performer or listener to reflect on the Tolka soundscape from multiple perspectives.



Figure 5. Tolka Chorus in Tolka Valley Park.

6.3. Performance at Tolka Valley Park

The performance of *Tolka Chorus* at Tolka Valley Park (Figure 5.) took the musical structure of a journey along the Tolka. This followed on from the group's improvisations based on flood-plain maps during workshops. For public performance these maps were adapted into an animated video by McIvor that was projected on the large screen at Tolka Valley Park. This allowed both performers and members of the audience to observe the map during performance. This animation acted as a graphic score that notated the changing position of the group's conceived geographical location.

Participants vocalised environmental sounds in response to the changing location and correlating extent of the Tolka flood-plain on the animated map. The seven text pieces were each designated to a distinct location along the map in reference to their conceptual underpinning (e.g. 'No Man's Land' was positioned at Dublin's industrial M50 roundabout; 'The Heron' was located in the pastoral townland of Piercetown, Meath). Upon arrival at a song destination the black background of the animated map burst into colour and an onscreen title indicated the change in mode to a text performance.

The performers were amplified with microphones and accompanied by pre-recorded fragments from their rehearsals. This bolstered both the density and reach of the vocal soundscape. The group also distributed songbooks that allowed audience members to read the text pieces and their accompanying verbal music notation, with the introduction: "Tonight you are invited to join in the chorus."

Tolka Chorus sought to give voice to communities and ecologies of the river, fostering new personal connections between participants, listeners and the local environment. By

attentively listening to their surroundings and letting their own vocalisations resonate through the landscape, the voices of *Tolka Chorus* demonstrated an alternative mode of aural engagement with the river.

7. Conclusion

Renowned Irish author and playwright, Samuel Beckett described the Tolka as one of Dublin's "infernal streams" (Nixon 2008). Whilst the Liffey proudly flows through the heart of Dublin, adorns tourist postcards and serves as an emblem of the city in literature, music and art; the Tolka flows through the margins of Dublin and, perhaps as a result of this, is marginalised. Industrial and urban development in Dublin has pushed the Tolka further and further out of eye and earshot, and resultantly out of the minds of many. When the Tolka rises back up, back in to consciousness, it generally does so either through flooding, pollution outbreaks or the accommodation of criminal acts. At these times, the attention the Tolka receives is understandably unfavourable.

Through public exhibition and performance, Tolka Nights sought to bring attention of a positive kind to the river. The events also sought to foreground the multi-faceted significance of the river and in doing show the river to be deserving of increased attention.

What the Tolka has in common with the Liffey and with rivers around the world is that it unifies in its single name a myriad of diverse people, geographies and histories. The river binds Dublin City with the townships of Meath; agriculture with manufacturing and recreation; the Battle of Clontarf with fish kills incidents. In its passage through territories, the river sets up a network of interdependency: upstream impacts downstream, downstream impacts upstream. In the process of Tolka Nights, the artist team sought to investigate, experience and creatively respond to the Tolka's variety. The three events of Tolka Nights in their wide range of both approach and content underscored the Tolka's variety. The events also sought to bring distinct communities together and spark discussion and interaction between these communities with regards the river that they all share.

The river soundscape was central to Tolka Nights. Through listening, recording, and studying the Tolka soundscape, Green ascertained a greater understanding of the Tolka's diversity. During Green's guided expeditions, the soundscape mediated encounters with the river's most captivating animals. The Tolka soundscape contributed music to Green's documentaries of the expeditions and helped convey the narrative of these journeys; and in doing helped express the worth of the river. The sound intervention of the third Tolka Nights event used the soundscape as a means to bring 'the real river' into the work; to magnify the river; draw the audience's attention and evoke their interactions. The sounds of the river evoked similar interactions between the participants of Tolka Chorus, allowing D'Arcy to facilitate musical composition and improvisation of an experimental nature that

attended not only to the riverside soundscape, but also to the social, historical and ecological contexts of the locale.

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