

# ‘Sorry, can’t hear you! I’m on a train!’ Ringing tones, meanings and the Finnish soundscape

HEIKKI UIMONEN

## Abstract

*This article explores how the use of mobile phones has changed the contemporary Finnish soundscape. The change manifests itself firstly via telephone conversations which have spread from private premises to public places and secondly via interchangeable ringing tones. Drawing on research carried out among cellular phone users, the article argues that the ringing tones are selected on the basis of musical taste, so they can no longer be regarded as impersonal telephone signals. They can be used as a means of distinction and identity like any music. Even if the quality of ringing tones is inferior to the original interpretation of the tune, they can still be considered to be music, because of their personal and collective associations.*

## Introduction

In Autumn 2002, the BBC reported that New York City council member Philip Reed demanded a ban on mobile phones in cinemas, live theatres and music venues. If this law were to be enacted, it would make talking on a phone in a place of public performance illegal, subject to a fine of up to fifty dollars (BBC 2002).

The cellular phone is one of the latest arrivals on the contemporary soundscape. Not just telephone conversations, but also ringing tones are heard in places that were inconceivable for such events a few years ago. Traditionally, the sound of the phone has been considered as a signal, but the range of melodies used in mobiles suggests that this may no longer be the case. Interchangeable ringing tones raise questions about the relevant definition of music in this context, and it is with this question that this article is concerned.

On the basis of interviews with Finnish cell phone users, I argue that ringing tones are selected by similar – but not identical – criteria to any music used as a means of distinction and identity. No matter how disturbing the mobiles may sound, their ringing tones are not randomly chosen. The use environment of a mobile makes the selection of music even more complicated: the melodies are heard in public and thus the musical preferences of the user may be commented on by anyone who desires to do so. Furthermore, the companies in the ringing tone business promote their products with arguments which relate to music more than to ordinary signals.

The article also explores the effects of ringing tones on the everyday Finnish soundscape. This includes reactions to the new sounds on a more general level: the values and attitudes that define ‘contemporary cell phone etiquette’. The article opens with a brief introduction to the relation between the soundscape and the new

technology, and then briefly discusses the spread of the cellular phone, since the dissemination of innovations also constitutes change in society and in social behaviour.

## Soundscape and technology

*Soundscape* may refer to any sonic environment regarded as a field of study. It may include actual environments or abstract constructions like musical compositions (Schafer 1977, p. 274). In contrast to the physical measurement of noise levels, multi-disciplinary soundscape research does not only address the negative aspects of sound. Rather than merely reducing the acoustic environment to a series of measurements, the concept of the soundscape takes a more holistic view (Smith 1993, p. 67) and puts the 'emphasis on how the environment is understood by those living within it' (Truax 2001, p. 11). This approach thus also addresses the personal and shared meanings attached to environmental sounds.

Technology has always played a major part in moulding the sonic environment. As the composer and musicologist R. Murray Schafer argues, the Industrial Revolution, with its new and loud sounds, changed the soundscape irrevocably (1977, p. 71). Moreover, as in other fields, technological innovations have also led to advances in soundscape studies, since with the help of recording technology, acoustic environments can be preserved in detail and investigated. The downside of this, however, is that electric sound reproduction and transmission have also irrevocably moulded our understanding of the soundscape. The phenomenon can be called *schizophonia*, referring to the split between an original sound and its reproduction (*ibid.*, p. 273). This term is somewhat provocative – perhaps deliberately – but nevertheless it is quite pertinent: both background and foreground music in public places is an inseparable part of today's urban soundscape. It is seldom questioned, if indeed even noticed. The postmodern era, which can be characterised as an era where mobility is combined with accessibility (Roos 1994, p. 24), is represented by laptop computers and mobile phones and their schizophonic contribution to the contemporary sonic environment.

The development of telecommunications can be seen as a change in the structure of urban society as profound as the proliferation of cars (Kopomaa 2000, p. 26). Soundscape researchers consider that it was the invention of the internal combustion engine that changed our acoustic environment most drastically compared to the pre-industrial era. It remains to be seen whether portable electronic devices and mobiles will have a comparable impact.

## Cellular phones

Finland, with a population of 5.2 million people, currently has more mobile phones per capita than any other country in the world. In 1999 there were about 3.2 million subscribers, i.e. approximately 60 phones per 100 inhabitants (*Statistics Finland 1999*, pp. 26–7, Kopomaa 2000, p. 28). The number of mobile phone subscriptions had overtaken wire-line subscriptions by the end of 1998 (*ibid.*).

The spread of mobile phones can be divided into three stages. During the *class markets* phase (1975–1990), mobile phones were expensive and rare and the cellular phone was linked to an image of 'yuppie' lifestyle. This was followed by the period of *mass markets* (1990–1995), when cellular phones became available to the general

public. The third and ongoing stage started in 1995, and it can be characterised as a *diversified mass market*, incorporating a range of different target groups, new designs and accessories (Kopomaa 2000, pp. 32–4).

Cultural meanings are constructed in practices, not in objects. The uses of innovations are also often more diverse, or even divergent, compared to the idea of the inventor. Hans-Magnus Enzensberger (1976, p. 23; Middleton 1993, p. 68) has written about late capitalist society's media systems that are 'leaky': the electronic media are democratic by nature, since they are easy to use and difficult to control. Although this does not hold true in all respects, because of the easy traceability of mobiles, Enzensberger's idea of the new uses and cultural meanings of a cellular phone are supported by the phenomena of short text messages and ringing tones. Chain short text messages have been used, for example, to rally demonstrators at a couple of days' notice. In the future, oral two-way communication may be only one of many functions of a mobile phone.

## Music, signals or musical signals

Operators, collecting societies, advertisers and ringing tone dealers attach various meanings to the melodic mobile phone ringing tones. In the following paragraphs I summarise their interests and above all the preferences of the cell phone users, since it is their selections and criteria that make the tunes audible in the soundscape.

### *Operators*

In August 2000, the mobile phone manufacturer Nokia made a contract with EMI Music Publishing allowing Nokia to use EMI's compositions as ringing tones in their products (Kotirinta 2000, p. B9). Artists' royalties are excluded from this contract. The Finnish copyright organisation Teosto has argued that ringing tones should be covered by performing rights regulations and handled by the collecting societies. Nokia sees ringing tones as a *mechanisation* of music and thus outside public performance (*ibid.*). For the time being, royalties are being paid to copyright holders for every downloaded ringing tone; the first contracts between Teosto and the operators were made in 1998 (Saaristo, personal communication 2001).

In 1999, the total revenue from ringing tones in Finland was 2.1 million euro, Teosto's share being 0.7 million (Kotirinta 2000, p. B9).<sup>1</sup> The number of ringing tone providers has increased and, according to one Finnish operator's estimate in 1990, the annual turnover on content services could rise to 13.5 million euro.<sup>2</sup> Sixty per cent of this consists of ringing tones and *mobile phone screen logos* (Junkkari 2000, p. D3).

The discussion of copyright with reference to ringing tones points towards increasingly 'hi-fi mobiles' in the future. Soon it will be possible to playback better quality recordings, downloading them, for instance, via the Internet for cellular phones. European consumers will soon be able to enjoy this facility, which has already been available in Japan for some time (Romanowski 2001).

The operators and ringing tone dealers like to embed meanings in their products that are more closely related to music than just to 'mechanised' ringing tones. For instance, the most popular ringing tones are downloadable via the Internet from several operators' popular music *Top Ten* lists. This close relation to music has also been efficiently exploited in advertising. To quote the lyrics of an old Finnish popular tune, retrieved from oblivion and slightly modified in an advertisement on local

buses, 'There is no good atmosphere on a bus without music'. Without a doubt, ringing tones are here considered as music; moreover, the advertisement aims to promote more positive attitudes towards the ringing tones constantly heard on public transport.

Surprisingly, ringing tones can also be used for religious or ideological purposes. One website, called *Temppeli* (The Temple), offers hymns and other Christian items such as biblical quotations and 'evangelical cell phone-screen logos', and encourages customers to evangelise by sending spiritual ringing tones to a friend's mobile phone. From another operator (*Voima* 2002, p. 45), left-wing ringing tones and Che Guevara logos are also available.

Ringing tones have already become part of the music industry. A company called *Wireless Entertainment Services* offers ringing tones to operators, in return for a specified percentage of the ringing tone revenue. The company's CEO commented that record companies need to understand how to extract maximum benefit from their products in all possible ways, because the lifespan of a hit tune is 'six months at the most' (Junkkari 2000, p. D3). This comment can be identified as referring to music by the use of the term 'hit tune'; otherwise the comment might refer to any mass-produced and short-lived commodity whatsoever.

Society makes a distinction between music and noise. Without this distinction there could not be such a concept as 'music', since otherwise *all* sounds could be considered as music and thus it would not have any distinct existence (Merriam 1976, p. 63).<sup>3</sup> In contemporary society, it has become impossible to create a comprehensive definition of music, since different interest groups and subcultures shape their own categories according to their preferences. In the dispute between Teosto and Nokia mentioned above, music – or more precisely, the public performance of music – was defined according to economic realities. Oddly enough, the opinions of cellular phone owners have not been heard, although it is they who defray the expenses of the copyright owners, operators and advertisers.

### *Users*

If *signals*<sup>4</sup> are sounds that are consciously listened to (Schafer 1977, p. 10), are they able to carry meanings in the same way as music does? In general, a traditional telephone signal merely indicates that somebody is trying to reach someone. Ringing tones also, clearly, fulfil this function. However, the possibility of selecting between different tones has transformed the function of the signal so that it can become part of one's personal or collective identity instead of being shared undifferentiatedly with the entire telephone-user community. It is rather difficult to embed more complex meanings in the impersonal ringing of a conventional fixed phone, whereas with cellular phones the signification possibilities have multiplied.

Eleven males (M) and eight females (F) were interviewed to explore their attitudes to these issues. Fifteen responded to the questions in groups, and four individually.<sup>5</sup> Three of the informants did not use mobile phones. The group informants and two of the informants in personal interviews consisted of sixteen-year-olds attending the Classical High School in Tampere. These students belong to the age group 14–19, which uses mobile services the most in Finland. Along with screen logos, ringing tones are the most popular service available (*Tekes* 2001, pp. 21–2). A thirty-nine-year-old male researcher (M11) and a twenty-five-year-old female student (F8), both non-mobile users, were also interviewed.

Ideally a ringing tone should be a personally pleasing melody, also serving as a functional, penetrating signal. The group interview informants reported that the melodies are mostly taken from contemporary pop songs, including evergreen melodies (well-known popular songs or tunes) and television theme songs. In order to function well, ringing tones need to stand out both from other sound sources in the environment, and from other cell-phone tunes. This affects the selection of a tune. Most of the informants used vibrating alerts alongside ringing tones, which reduces the necessity of a ringing tone.

If the tunes were to serve solely as a signal to contact someone, they could be replaced by vibrating alerts. Because of the various meanings attached to the melodies, they also have an effect on the surrounding sonic environment. A ringing tone mediates the kind of aural information the phone owner desires it to mediate to the environment.

A ringing tone need not necessarily be one's favourite music. For instance, one informant had installed Mungo Jerry's *In the Summertime*, as a kind of seasonal song, although not particularly fond of it otherwise (F7). The informants stressed that *any melody* could serve as a ringing tone; but on closer examination, it appeared that Britney Spears melodies, among others, did not qualify (M6, M7). Top-ten melodies were also avoided because of their popularity (F1, M1, M2); one informant commented that these are used by 'teenagers and people bothered by other people's opinions' (F1). On the other hand they were not necessarily excluded, especially if you 'happen to like them' (F1). This is partly explained by the age of the informants. Instead of following the trend and using the most popular tunes – which they probably would have done a couple of years earlier – they were now making more personal choices.

The latest hits are also rather short-lived on phones. Constant repetition by the broadcast media, together with constant ringing from cell phones, shortens their lifespan as melodic ringing tones in comparison with non-melodic ones. Tones are thus being used like contemporary hit melodies – once they are no longer fashionable, they are replaced. One of the informants referred to this as 'rather shallow behaviour', but still likes to have the opportunity of doing so (F4).

The use of current hit melodies also leads to confusion in public spaces as to whose phone is ringing (F1, F2, F3), which is to be predicted, since they are products of a shared popular culture and based on the idea of reproduction. The situation is made easier by the availability of a wider range of distinctive ringing tones. A couple of years ago, when the choices were limited to a few fixed tones from mobile phone manufacturers, misidentifications were more common. The informants commented that short text messages cause similar confusion (F2, F3, M9, F5, F6).

One solution to this problem is to compose one's own ringing tone in order to personalise one's sonic environment. Most of the informants had experimented with this, although composing was hindered by the limited technical possibilities of mobiles; moreover, most of the pieces sounded 'lousy' (M1). One of the informants questioned the whole composing process, commenting that you really cannot talk about *composing* when you are installing sounds on your mobile phone (M9).

Technological innovations have made it more complex to differentiate *music* from *signals*. With electroacoustic technology, we can take sound out of time and repeat it as many times as we like (Truax 2001, p. 165). This can be compared to a situation when a word is repeated 'over and over until the linguistic meaning is minimised and the sound itself remains' (*ibid.*). Repetition also explains the

popularity of interchangeable ringing tones: when a tune is heard several times a day it certainly wears thin rather quickly.

On average, these informants installed several new tones per year. The expense was cut by copying from a friend or using various tones on the same phone. Different melodies can be stored in the memory of a phone and thus used to signify different callers. More pleasant melodies were reserved for friends, whereas family members were often signified by standard ringing tones (M1, F5, F6, F7). 'Mother's calls' were thus instantly recognised (F7). Various groups of acquaintances might also be allocated the same melody, e.g. fellow tennis players, whose tone was a song called *We Are the Champions* (F6). The different aspects of identity are heard in various ringing tones, and as they function as a means of signifying different callers, they also indicate groups with which a person wants to identify.

Depending on the user, 'short-term relationships' could be established using different ringing tones for diverse personal meanings, including ironic ones. Even an ice cream van melody is now downloadable – a melody notoriously known to arouse mixed emotions in the evenings in quiet suburbs. However, most of the informants rejected these kinds of ringing tones, considering them as curiosities. Some of them admitted having used musical ringing tones in less serious ways, including the parody or 'camp' use of old pop tunes, theme songs from children's television programmes, Britney Spears tunes – again – and the national anthem of the former Soviet Union (F3, M1, F4). One female informant reported how she had competed with her brother for the 'tackiest' ringing tone available (F4).

Irritating people could be signified by irritating melodies, in contrast to more pleasant persons (M1, F1). A nice and catchy tune makes the act of answering more pleasant – 'you are already feeling good when you pick the phone up'. Tones have also been used to bring back pleasant memories from the time when the original song was heard for the first time (F4). The recording qualities of a mobile phone enable one also to use other sounds, or voices, for this purpose. One way to personalise a ringing tone was thus to ask a friend to sing a melody into the phone (F4).

The ringing tone does not have to sound exactly the same as heard before in other contexts. An interesting perspective is offered by H. Stith Bennett, who researched performing rock groups that played cover songs. He concluded that the audience is not concerned with the group's own performance, but 'with some autonomously memorised set of sounds which is only sketched by the live musicians' (1980, p. 156). To put it crudely: the players play what they do not play and the listeners listen to what they do not hear.

Musical compositions used as mobile phone signals can be seen in an analogous way. It is doubtful whether anybody would claim a beeping or a simplified ringing tone to be equivalent to the original recording, especially with the poor sound quality of mobile phones. Nevertheless it must be remembered that this holds true only in a technical sense: both personal and collective meanings embedded in ringing tones are more than just a melody, whether they are used to manifest a religious or ideological world view, or possibly used ironically.

Drawing on Bennett, we can say that mobile phone melodies 'sketch' the songs. Easily recognised, distinctive melodies and choruses are usually selected (M3, M4, M5, M6, F3, F7). The tone has to resemble the original composition and bring it to mind, but it is not considered comparable to it. Informants' negative comments usually referred to musical features, e.g. if a favourite song is arranged as a 'high-pitched beeping' (F6). However, the images brought to mind instantly when the

melody is heard from the phone are important criteria when the ringing tone is being selected (F4, F7).

Some songs or melodies were considered too important to be used as a ringing tone. Because of this, two of the informants were reluctant to use their favourite music in their mobiles (F3, M9). This was clearly stated by a male informant (M9) who refused on musical grounds to use ringing tones, arguing that it showed a 'lack of respect for the original composition'; he also considered recent, polyphonic ringing tones as 'gimmickry'. Moreover, he also suggested that the standard ringing tone which he was using was free of the 'stigmatising properties' of a musical tone. The rejection of a ringing tone can be seen here as a means of distinction. The choice is clearly a musical one and seemingly important to the interviewee since he uses vocabulary which suggests a rather rigidly critical stance in his relation to musical ringing tones.

Some informants thought that polyphonic ringing tones or tunes of better musical quality would be a pleasant alternative to the older tones (F1, M2, M7). These were also preferred by a non-mobile user informant, although she took a slightly sceptical view of different songs playing at the same time in public places (F8). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the sound of a better-quality mobile with a wider frequency range can penetrate far in a city soundscape. One of the informants confirmed this and stated that they do not stand out that well when compared to the other ringing tones (F7).

Although a ringing tone distinguishes one individual user from others, the selection of melody can also enable a teenager to conclude if the user 'digs' the right kind of music or not (Turtiainen, personal communication 2000). Ringing tones can thus contain more information for members of a subgroup with which a cell phone user identifies than for someone who happens to hear a tune accidentally. Thus the ringing tones can manifest the togetherness, distinction, and *soundscape competence*<sup>6</sup> of a certain group.

The informants claimed that the opinions of other people had no effect on the selection of a ringing tone; however, some informants commented on friends' mobile melodies – one of them even to the extent that he asked his friends to replace a tune to something less aggravating (M9). Somewhat more subtle means were employed by a male non-mobile user who commented on his fellow student's catchy mobile by miming to it for 'half an hour' (M10).

Some of the negative comments were driven by musical taste. If the ringing tone differed strongly from one's own preferences – e.g. classical music – it was considered poor. Over-simple and badly arranged melodies were not liked either. Some informants found it irritating when they could not recognise the melody of a ringing tone, whereas others preferred not to recognise it too *well* – e.g. the free ringing tones familiar from commercials (F4, M9). These freely downloadable tunes were commented on more readily and more negatively than other melodies (M9).

The sonic qualities of ringing tones were also mentioned, e.g. a dislike for high-pitched melodies. Showing-off – demonstrating one's ringing tone in public, for example – was also found annoying. Even if phones have been accepted as a source of a 'blessed noise'<sup>7</sup> in the soundscape, their excessive and unnecessary use was strongly criticised (M3, M4, M5, M6, M10).

When asked about the musical aspects of ringing tones, both non-user informants took a negative stand. The forty-year-old male informant commented wryly that it cannot be music, since the users do their utmost in order to stop the

melody as soon as it has started to play. He considered the melodies more like signals. However, he admitted that some cell-phone evergreen tunes have managed to ‘creep’ into his memory (M11)

The female non-user informant (F8) commented rather straightforwardly that the ringing tone is ‘raped music’: a melody originally meant to be used in quite different contexts has been reduced to ‘ridiculous beeping’. Even so, she pondered that if music is sound organised by a human being, then a ringing tone must be music; but finished by arguing that in music there must be some aesthetic aspects, and thus a ringing tone cannot be considered as real music.

### Attitudes and endurances – restructuring the soundscape

One characteristic feature with many industrial products is that they can change the social order and thus cause disruption (Kopomaa 2000, p. 90). More silent inventions can be ignored, whereas louder ones demand attention and response. This is because the sense of hearing is less selective in its response to the stimuli of the environment than eyesight – sound insists that the listener should react.<sup>8</sup> Sounds also go around obstacles and take over space more efficiently than visual stimuli do. They can be used as a *defensive* or *offensive* barrier against the soundscape (Wrightson 2000, p. 12). Walkman users, creating their private head-spaces (Schafer 1977, p. 118), for instance, are able to protect themselves from a soundscape that they perhaps find unpleasant.

The interviewees stated that they did not try to affect the soundscape intentionally, or at least they did not articulate their answers that way. The selection of the melodies was justified by their taste in music and the penetrating qualities of a tune. More important than the conscious moulding of the soundscape was the image that the melodies mediated of their users. If the melody was considered poor, the owners found it embarrassing if they could not switch it off quickly enough in a public place (F7, M3, M8).

An offensive barrier against the soundscape was created explicitly on Swedish building sites in the 1980s by using ghettoblasters. A new generation with new sound-reproduction technology entered the sites and converted some of them into ‘virtual musical battlefields’, with a dozen or more cassette-players blaring at the same time. Headphones could not be used, because of the possible need for warning shouts at a hazardous place of work. The working teams were established on the basis of musical taste, and because of this the practice of craftsmen teaching working skills to a younger generation came to an end on many sites (Stockfelt 1994, p. 35).

However loud, the sound of a ghettoblaster is usually restricted to certain kinds of space. Because of the wide dissemination of cellular base stations and the diffusion of mobiles, the ubiquitous nature of a cell phone provides much better opportunities for anyone to change almost any soundscape with a ringing tone or a loud conversation. The latter impact becomes especially emphasised in districts where reception for cellular phones is poor: if audibility happens to be bad, speakers tend to raise their voices. R. Murray Schafer (2000, p. 30) sees both sonic incomers as ‘vulgar toys’, but assumes that mobiles will outlive ghettoblasters.<sup>9</sup>

It has been claimed that mobile phone users offend against their fellow citizens’ privacy and take it for their own use (Kopomaa 2000, p. 93). What is often considered as an undesirable use of a mobile phone is that the phone rings when it should not ring; that the phone is not answered quickly enough; or that the phone is answered or spoken into too loudly (*ibid.*, p. 99). Cell phones have shifted phone conversations



into public space, privatised those places and widened their user's *acoustic territory*. However, in many cases these conversations are no longer *private*, since other people are forced to listen to these conversations, possibly to the point of embarrassment. This was especially commented on by the two informants who did not own cell phones (F8, M11).

Conversely, at the same time, private space is converted into public space. The border between private and public talk has become blurred, to the extent that personal matters are taken up for discussion in public spaces. Drawing on Richard Sennett, Kopomaa takes the view that 'dealing with intimate matters in a public milieu is a sign of an uncivilised society' (Sennett 1986, p. 340; Kopomaa 2000, p. 94). Although speech in public spaces is reduced by *short text messages*, this does not eliminate cellular phone beeps. The impact of this innovation in communication on the soundscape is illustrated by the fact that the leading Finnish operator delivers millions of messages every month (Lintilä, Savolainen and Vuorensyrjä 2000, p. 54). Short text message beeps were also mentioned in the interviews. Unlike the melodic ringing tones, they occasionally tend to be mixed with each other more easily, which makes their use somewhat inconvenient (F3, M7, M9). The signals as such were not considered disturbing.

There are still some spaces which are off-limits for cellular phones, such as aeroplanes and churches. Other off-limit zones include focused situations of social interaction, like concerts and religious events; 'sanctified' places like libraries which demand silence; and areas where phones would cause safety risks such as hospitals (Kopomaa 2000, p. 101). Nonetheless, it seems that even the soundscapes of formerly sanctified places are in transition. One female informant (F8) commented that short text messages are sent and telephones answered during choir rehearsal, even while a piece of music is being practised, creating audible disarray in a situation where a group of people had entered into a prior social agreement to act in a particular way. When she remarked on her fellow singers' behaviour, she was labelled by them – rather paradoxically – as a 'disturber'. The new behaviour conventions of mobile phone users can thus also impact on the lives of their fellow citizens who might not be so enthusiastic about the new electronics.

So far, in Finland, the sounds of mobile phones have not aroused extensive public discussion. When Finnish Rail (VR) was asked about the possibility of phone-free compartments on trains, they initially answered that they do not want to 'restrict' the use of phones, but advised passengers to use the phone booths on the train (*Matkaan-lehti* 2000, pp. 20–1). This comment is rather absurd, considering the number of mobile phones in Finland, since at that time there was only one booth on each train, and it was located in the first-class accommodation. Meanwhile, the company promised in the near future technical improvements for better reception for mobile phones on trains.

For an aggrieved individual, achieving change in the socio-acoustic order is not possible, since control of the most powerful sounds of society are beyond the reach of a lay person (Tagg 1992, p. 339). Or to quote Jacques Attali: 'Everywhere, power reduces the noise made by others and adds sound prevention to its arsenal' (1985, p. 122). Background music in public places is one manifestation of this auditory oligarchy.

The selection of music is often left in the hands of companies specialised in sound milieus or advertising music. In a thought-provoking article, Ronald M. Radano (1989, p. 453) writes that Muzak moulds commonly shared places by

'transposing a sonic image of a familiar domestic world into the public space'. This is done with the help of familiar songs that play an important role in citizens' lives. Repetition brings them close both 'spatially and humanly, accompanying the individual in both public and private life' (*ibid.*, p. 455).

Contrary to the arguments cited earlier in this article, Radano believes that songs do not wear thin; instead, through repetition the memories grow deeper. On the other hand, one might also argue that individuals' valuable and cherished memories are banalised, since they cannot choose what to listen to, when to listen, and where to listen. They are exposed to music which has been selected only on the basis of the playing policy of the public places that they are attending.

Even if the socio-acoustic order cannot be changed, the acoustic conventions can be disputed or questioned (Finnegan 2002, p. 76). The use of a mobile phone can be considered as one alternative means to control one's own space, since a ringing tone enables urban dwellers to bring musical preferences to other people's ears. The disadvantage of this activism is that not all the people within earshot are likely to share the musical preferences of the mobile owner; and even if they do, it is open to question whether they want to listen to their favourite music as a simplified ringing tone arrangement in a place that they do not necessarily find attractive. This was also confirmed by one of the interviewees (M1). Both background music and ringing tones may elicit memories, but in the latter case the selection of the tunes and their dissemination are in the hands of the mobile owners.

Paradoxically, a society which has become noisier creates a new need for the individual to be heard distinctly, and offers tools to fulfil this need. Even if the ringing tone can be used to reclaim acoustic space from background or advertising music, at the same time it provides a free promotion for the artist, the record company and the mobile phone manufacturer. Or more precisely, the promotion is *not* free, in the sense that a user pays for the ringing tones and the use of a mobile anyway. It is also good to bear in mind that individuals are not solely controlled sonically by the powers that be, but also by their fellow citizens. The interviewees commented that when a ringing tone of a friend was considered too irritating, he or she was quickly asked to replace it with some other melody (M9, M10).

Mobiles have also changed the soundscapes of public venues reserved for music or other performing arts. Ringing tones or talking on a phone during a concert can be perceived as noise, since it definitely disturbs other members of the audience. This is presumably what New York City council member Philip Reed had in mind when he proposed restrictions on cellphone use. However, ringing tones can also be listened to consciously, as musical compositions, not just as sonic intruders which distract the listener. *Dialtones: A Telesymphony* was performed in Austria as a part of the *Ars Electronica Festival* in 2001 (<http://www.flong.com/telesymphony>). It consisted of the audience's cellular phones, which were used to perform the composition.

According to the organisers, *Dialtones* 'invites its participants to perceive an order in what is otherwise disorganised public noise, and ratify it as a chorus of organised social sound'. They consider that mobile sounds become 'organised social sound' when they are arranged and transferred into a concert hall, traditionally reserved for classical music, but not in an outdoor environment, where diverse and personal ringing tones can be heard. Thus, perhaps disturbing 'disorganised public noise' has been legitimated as music, by bringing it into a different context. A similar change occurred in street music a few centuries ago, when performances were brought indoors and street musicians' and buskers' activities restricted (Schafer 1977,

p. 66). The demarcation line between a signal and music has certainly become blurred also in this sense.

## Conclusion

Mobile phone ringing tones cannot be divided dualistically into signals *versus* music: nor can they be placed on a continuum from signal to music either. A ringing tone needs to fulfil two kinds of functions, both communicative and aesthetic. A pleasing tune or song will be abandoned if it does not sound good enough on a mobile, or because of its inferior penetrating qualities. On the other hand, a tone which qualifies as a piercing signal may also be rejected, if it is considered too popular or is liable to be confused with other users' tones.

I claim that even if the quality of a ringing tone is inferior to the original interpretation of a song or a tune, it can still be considered as music on the grounds of the personal and collective meanings associated with it. The mobile phone tunes may have various connotations just like any other musical melody.

Ringling tones offer alternative means to personalise one's phone. Personal and/or collective music tastes define the melodies that are selected. Although some of the informants claimed that any melody could serve as a ringing tone, this is not necessarily so, partly because of the assertion of an *omnivorous taste for music*, i.e. the liberal stand that informants might take when their musical preferences are challenged. When asked in more detail, the answers are prone to change, and differences in opinions emerge.

In this article, the definitions of music were outlined by mobile users, collecting societies, advertisers, ringing tone dealers, and operators. Mobile phone users and their musical tastes obviously emerged as the most audible of these. It must be remembered, however, that it is not only the selection of a personalised ringing tone which is based on musical taste; to reject these options altogether and to stick to a standard tone is a musical choice as well.

## Endnotes

1. Twelve million FIM and 4.2 million FIM, respectively, in the former Finnish currency.
2. Eighty million FIM.
3. See also Attali (1985).
4. Not all the signals are listened to consciously. Residents get accustomed to the sounds of their environment that would be noticed by someone who is visiting the area. A listener's attitude or the meanings attached to sounds can change their role in the sonic environment (see also Truax 2001, p. 25).
5. F1, F2, M1, M2 – Group 1, MD I/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 11 October 2002; M3, M4, M5, M6 – Group 2, MD I/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 11 October 2002; F3, M7, M8, M9 – Group 3, MD I/Klasu & MD II/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 11 October 2002; F4, F5, F6 – Group 4, MD II/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 14 October 2002; F7, MD II/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 14 October 2002; M10, MD II/Klasu, interview conducted at The Classical High School of Tampere, Finland, 14 October 2002; F8, MD III/Klasu, interview conducted at Tampere, Finland, 21 October 2002; M11, a telephone interview, 22 October 2002.
6. Tacit knowledge about the structure of environmental sounds (Truax 2001, p. 57).
7. An unpleasant sound which is endured because it makes work – or in this case life – easier (Pöyskö 1995, p. 76).
8. This does not hold true in all respects. Background sounds in a familiar environment remain unnoticed unless they are actively listened to. For different ways of listening, see Truax (2001).
9. A couple of years later in Finland, Schafer met a young choir singer who had programmed part of Schafer's composition *The Medieval*

*Bestiary* onto his mobile in order to memorise it more efficiently. The proud phone owner also

demonstrated his idea to the composer (Järviluoma 2002, personal communication).

## References

- Attali, J. 1985. *Noise. The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis)
- BBC News, UK Edition. 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2499023.stm>, 23 November
- Bennett, H.S. 1980. *On Becoming a Rock Musician* (Amherst)
- Dialtones: A telesymphony*. 2002. <http://www.flong.com/telesymphony>
- Enzensberger, H.M. 1976. 'Constituents of a theory of the media', in *Raids and Reconstructions: Essays on Politics, Crime, and Culture* (London), pp. 20–53
- Finnegan, R. 2002. *Communicating. The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection* (London and New York)
- Junkkari, M. 2000. Freestyler soittoäänien ykkönen. Soittoäänien bisnes vetää jo Nokiaakin [Freestyler number one ringing tone. Also Nokia attracted to ringing tone business], *Helsingin Sanomat*, 9 September, p. D3
- Kopomaa, T. 2000. *The City in Your Pocket. Birth of the Mobile Information Society* (Helsinki)
- Kotirinta, P. 2000. Soittoäänibisnes kuumenee. Nokia solmi sopimuksen suoraan EMImusiikkikustannuksen kanssa – ja ohitettiin Teoston [Ringtone business is getting hotter. Nokia reached an agreement with EMI ignoring Teosto], *Helsingin Sanomat*, 19 October, p. B9
- Lintilä, L., Savolainen, R., and Vuorensyrjä, M. 2000. 'Suomalaisen tietoyhteiskunnan tila' [The state of the Finnish information society], in *Tieto ja tietoyhteiskunta* [Information and information society], ed. R. Savolainen and M. Vuorensyrjä (Helsinki), pp. 42–77
- Matkaan-lehti*. 2000. 'Sivuraide' [Side-track], November, pp. 20–1
- Merriam, A.P. 1976. *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston)
- Middleton, R. 1993. *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes)
- Pöyskö, M. 1995. 'Siunattu melu ja pikku muu. Aspekteja navetan äänimaisemasta' [Blessed noise and little moo. Aspects of the cowshed soundscape], in *Musiikkimaailmoja ja äänimaisemia: Virtain kuulokulma* [Music worlds and soundscapes: listening point of Virrat], ed. H. Järviluoma (Tampere), pp. 59–78
- Radano, R.M. 1989. 'Interpreting muzak: speculations on musical experience in everyday life', *American Music*, 7, pp. 448–60
- Romanowski, O. 2001. 'Koneääni' [The sound of the machine]. Lecture, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 1 October
- Roos, J.P. 1994. 'A post-modern mystery: why do Finns, "silent in two languages", have the highest density of mobiles in the world?', *Intermedia*, pp. 24–8
- Schafer, R.M. 1977. *Tuning of the World* (New York)
2000. 'Soundscape, then and now', in *From Awareness to Action. Proceedings from 'Stockholm, Hey Listen!' Conference on Acoustic Ecology, Stockholm, 9–13 June 1998*, ed. H. Karlsson (Stockholm), pp. 25–32
- Sennett, R. 1986. *The Fall of Public Man* (London)
- Smith, C.J. 1993. *The Acoustic Experience of Place: An Exploration of the Soundscapes of Three Vancouver Area Residential Neighbourhoods*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Simon Fraser University
- Statistics Finland. 1999. *On the Road to the Finnish Information Society II* (Helsinki)
- Stockfelt, O. 1994. 'Cars, buildings and soundscapes', in *Soundscapes. Essays on Vroom and Moo*, ed. H. Järviluoma (Tampere), pp. 19–38
- Tagg, P. 1992. 'Musiikki joukkoviestinnän tutkimuksessa' [Music in mass communication research], in *Toosa soi. Musiikki radion kilpailuvälineenä?* [Radio set is playing. Music as an asset in radio?], ed. A. Alm and K. Salminen (Helsinki), pp. 329–43
- Tekes (The National Technology Agency). 2001. *Digitalisoituvan viestinnän monet kasvot* [Many faces of digitalising media] [www.tekes.fi/julkaisut/Digitalisoituvan\\_viestinnan\\_monet\\_kasvot.pdf](http://www.tekes.fi/julkaisut/Digitalisoituvan_viestinnan_monet_kasvot.pdf)
- Temppele. 2003. <http://www.temppele.net/Soittoaani/Soittoaani.html>
- Truax, B. 2001. *Acoustic Communication*, second edition (Westport)
- Voima*. 2002. Advertisement entitled, 'An alternative to your cell phone', 26 April, p. 45
- Wrightson, K. 2000. 'An introduction to acoustic ecology', in *Soundscapes. The Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, 1, pp. 10–3