Music 170: Sound in Space

Tamara Smyth, trsmyth@ucsd.edu
Department of Music,
University of California, San Diego (UCSD)

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Auditory Localization

- How does the ear allow us to perceive where in space a sound is located?
- The location of a sound source is typically defined by its **direction** and **distance**.
- The **direction** is expressed in terms of
  - **azimuth angle**: in the horizontal plane passing through the listener’s head: $0^\circ$ directly in front, $180^\circ$ directly behind
  - **angle of elevation**: in a vertical plane bisecting the listener: $-90^\circ$ directly below, $+90^\circ$ directly above
Interaural Time and Intensity

• In addition to the direction-dependent filtering done by the pinnae...

• Direction is determined predominantly by differences in a sound’s **arrival time** and **intensity** between the ears:

  • **Interaural time difference (ITD)** is the perceived delay between the sound reaching both ears:
    - if directly in front, the sound will reach both ears at the same time (ITD = 0)
    - listeners can resolve the location to about 2° in front and 10° from behind.

  • **Interaural intensity difference (IID)** occurs due angle-dependent *shadowing*:
    - when source not centered, the head partially *shadows* the opposite ear, diminishing intensity.
ITD and IID Cues

- The degree to which these cues are effective is dependent on the frequency content of the sound.

- Both ITD and IID are ineffective at low frequencies (below 270 Hz), and thus direction of such sounds is more difficult to determine.

- **ITD cues:**
  - less precise behind a listener because the change in the ITD per degree in location change is smaller.
  - most effective between 270 and 500 Hz
  - little contribution above 1400 Hz

- **IID cues:**
  - less sensitive to sound sources behind the head,
  - very small for frequencies below 500 Hz,
  - contribute more at higher frequencies
  - dominate at (and above) about 1400 Hz

- IID and ITD are insufficient: pinnae filtering is most pronounced above 4000 Hz.
Cues for Judging Distance

• The principle cues for judging distance are:

  1. **intensity of the sound**: amplitude diminishes inversely with distance (though depends on familiarity with sound);

  2. **ratio of reverberated to direct sound (R/D)**: reverb increases with distance until an *audio horizon* is reached and distance cannot be discerned;

  3. **amount of high-frequency energy in the sound**: since there is greater attenuation of propagating sound at high frequencies, there is perceivable absence of high-frequency components at long distances.
Reverberation

• The effect of reverberation on sound depends on the room or environment in which the sound is played.
• Reverberation is produced naturally by the reflection of sounds off surfaces.

![Diagram of sound reflection paths](image)

Figure 1: Example reflection paths occurring between source (S) and listener (L).

• The amount and quality of reverb depends on
  – the volume and dimensions of the space,
  – the type, shape and number of surfaces the sound encounters.

• **Impulse response of a cave**
Reflections

• Sound can take several paths from its source before reaching the listener; only one is *direct*.

![Diagram showing sound paths](image)

• The listener receives many delayed images of the sound (e.g. reflections from walls, ceiling, floor...) which lengthens the time the sound is heard.

![Graph showing amplitude vs time with early echoes and direct sound](image)

• Sound is not only delayed, but it also decays:
  – the greater the distance travelled, the more the amplitude decreases;
  – reverberation has a decaying amplitude envelope.
Physical Measurements Affecting Reverb

- Character of reverb can be determined by the following measurements:

1. reverb time (RT or T60):
   - time required for a sound to decrease 60 dB (how long a listener will hear a sound);

2. frequency dependence of reverb time:
   - T60 is not uniform over audible frequency range;

3. time delay between the arrival of the direct sound and the first reflection:
   - the more perceivable time between echoes;

4. rate at which the echo density builds:
   - after first reflection, rate at which echos reach the listener rapidly increases producing echo density.

1. Reverb Time (RT or T60)

- **T60:**
  - time required for a sound to decay by 60 dB,
  - proportional to how long a listener hears a sound.

- **T60 depends on:**
  - **room volume:** rooms with larger volume tend to have longer T60s;
  - **number of reflective surfaces:** T60 will decrease with an increase in surface area;
  - **nature of reflective surfaces:**
    * **absorptivity:** hard, solid, nonporous surfaces reflect acoustic energy more efficiently than softer material (e.g. curtains),
    * **roughness:** if the surface is not perfectly flat, part of the sound is reflected and part is dispersed in other directions.

- **T60 also dependent on the amplitude of the original sound and the presence of other sounds.**

- Listen to **RT demo.**
2. Frequency Dependence of T60

- T60 is not uniform over the range of audible frequencies.
- In a well designed concert hall, the low frequencies are the last to fade:
  - absorptive materials are better reflectors of low-frequency sounds;
  - efficient reflectors (e.g. marble) reflect sounds of all frequencies with nearly equal efficiency.
- With small solid objects, efficiency and direction of reflection are both frequency dependent:
  - results in frequency-dependent dispersion which can alter the waveform of a sound.
3. Delay between Direct Sound and First Reflection

- A long delay (> 50 ms) can result in distinct echoes
- A short delay (< 5 ms) contributes to the listener’s perception that the space is small
- A delay between 10 and 20 ms is found in most good concert halls.

Figure 2: An example impulse response showing direct sound, early reflections, and exponential decay of the sound.
4. Rate Echo Density Builds

- After the initial reflection, the rate at which the echoes reach the listener begins to increase rapidly.
- A listener can distinguish differences in echo density up to a density of 1 echo/ms.
- Time to reach this threshold
  - influences the character of the reverberation (typically 100 ms in a good situation).
  - is roughly proportional to the square root of the volume of the room (small spaces are characterized by a rapid buildup of echo density).