

## **EAR ROOM | re-sounding dialogues across the globe**

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### **ER. Can you talk about the origins of the Vancouver Soundscape Project - how it came about, and your own involvement.**

HW. The *World Soundcape Project* (WSP) was a research project, initiated by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer at Simon Fraser University in the late 60s and remained under his direction until the late seventies. When I joined the project in 1973, the group (then consisting of R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, Peter Huse, Howard Broomfield, Bruce Davies and myself) were working on the document entitled *The Vancouver Soundscape*, published shortly after as 2 LPs and a book. It was probably one of the first attempts to conduct a comprehensive study of an entire urban soundscape.

### **ER. And what were the backgrounds of those mentioned above?**

HW. Most of us were composers and musicians. At that time the composer was perceived not only as the acoustic designer of musical sound in a composition, but also and most importantly as an acoustic designer of daily life. As a result we studied the many aspects of sound and applied it to real life situations. Rather than staying marginalized by producing inaccessible and abstract art music to small exclusive audiences, we thought of the composer as a valuable contributor towards dealing with issues of soundscape. Composers could become the socially

conscious, sonic architects or acoustic designers of our cities, buildings, and villages. It was precisely this—the vision of the artist/composer as a crafts person, as someone trained in all disciplines of sound, and as someone entirely connected to and useful in the real working world—that attracted me to the World Soundscape Project. And Schafer’s vision went further:

An equivalent revolution is now called for among the various fields of sonic studies. The revolution will consist of a unification of those disciplines concerned with the science of sound and those concerned with the art of sound. The result will be the development of the interdisciplines acoustic ecology and acoustic design.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, not only did we as composers familiarize ourselves with the various scientific aspects of sound, but we also saw it as our task to bring together the various professions that were already dealing with acoustics, sound and noise.

**ER. Do you think you’ve achieved this amalgamation of disciplines and professions?**

HW. To date, more than 35 years later this vision of the various fields of sonic studies working together that Schafer presents in the above quote seems to be taking root finally and slowly. Like the original members of the WSP, most people who initially felt a natural attraction to the field of soundscape studies or acoustic ecology have been composers, musicians, radio artists, and so on. The odd architect, geographer, town planner, psychologist, acoustical engineer, audiologist and others have indeed become involved. But these used to be exceptions, scholars and professionals who have dared to break the boundaries

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<sup>1</sup> Schafer, R. Murray (1977). *The Tuning of the World*. Alfred Knopf, NY. p. 205.

of their own specialization and wanted to move towards a more interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach to sound. But in recent years more and more researchers, scientists and professionals have been embracing concepts of acoustic ecology in their studies on sound and acoustics across various disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

**ER. You must have been actively listening to this (Vancouver) soundscape for over thirty years now. In that time what changes have you noticed in the soundscape of the place?**

HW. Not only the soundscape has changed but also the listening itself. On a personal level, many years of listening practice, growing older, going through life changes and experiences, inevitably have shaped my perception in ever-changing ways. On a more general level, attention to sound and soundscape has changed significantly since the 70s. Sound design as a named discipline did not exist 40 years ago. Now it does: in film, in video games, in children toys, in cell phone rings, in appliances, motors, jet planes, just to name a few. But from the ecological perspective the soundscape has not become quieter. Sound design may have made many motors quieter, but there are more motors in our lives. Sound design may have created some interesting sound signals, but we also hear many more in daily life. Adding sound and music to just about anything and any situation is now a status quo, which did not exist in the 70s.

So, it is not so easy to speak in a comprehensive way about changes in an entire urban area. The more important issue really is whether the population is conscious of the changes and actively participating in encouraging or preventing them? Is there a public debate about the quality of our soundscape?

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<sup>2</sup> The previous two paragraphs were adapted from: Westerkamp, Hildegard, "Bauhaus and Soundscape Studies—Exploring Connections and Differences", Aspects of this text were originally presented in two lectures at the Symposium *From Bauhaus to Soundscape*, Goethe Institut Tokyo, October 1994, revised March 2002. For entire article see: <http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/writings.html>

**ER. Have you noticed any change in environmental sound awareness on a larger public scale?**

HW. In Vancouver specifically there are small pockets of awareness and changes, but in terms of implementation of sound design on the level of the city government and urban planning, little has improved. I can name a few encouraging changes that are happening mostly through the initiation of cultural activities, artistic energy: for example the fact that there have been regular soundwalks for about 8 years now as part of Vancouver New Music's yearly concert season and that people attend them mostly in good numbers is a sign that people desire to find a relationship to place through listening, want to become conscious of what the soundscape can offer them. Those who have been designing and leading these walks are applying their new- found skills in other contexts, such as schools, with special needs groups, in galleries, community centres and so on.

But there is little public debate about the fact that the enormous and fast-paced increase in high rises in Vancouver has produced an increase in air conditioning outlets and thus a 'thicker' urban throb that hovers over the city. There is no debate about this here, let alone about the location of these outlets. This ever-growing city in the context of increased global travel has also brought with it an inevitable increase in air traffic. There is no public debate about the fact that much of the traffic moves right across the city and not only during the day – jets, helicopters and seaplanes alike.

Industry has been moved from much of the waterfront and has been replaced by parks, residential buildings, seawalls for pedestrians and cyclists and has changed the soundscape significantly and mostly in a positive way. Access to

the waterfront for the general population has opened up more open spaces and increased its quality of life. In addition, many water fountains in many different urban spaces not only help to mask traffic noise but also increase the sense of well-being for those sitting next to them, those taking a break from the work place during lunch hour.

**ER. Are there any sounds you have noticed that have changed or even possibly become extinct during your extensive listening?**

HW. Most prominently the sounds of the foghorns have changed: from the old diaphone which could be heard 20 miles away, to a less powerful one in the late seventies, to a squeaky high electronic one in the nineties, I believe, that can only be heard by small boats passing close by.

A train used to travel through the city around 9 p.m. at night and honk its horn at every crossing: long long short long. One could trace its route for a long time as it traversed the city from north to south. The train tracks still exist but the route is no longer travelled. Cash registers have changed, dial phones no longer exist.

**ER. General critics of acoustic ecology often say those involved discriminate and de value the sonic potential of an urbanised city/ environment. How would you respond to this accusation?**

HW. These critiques have misunderstood our work and tend to squeeze it into as rather simplistic frame. It is as if they have never really read our documents or Schafer's book, or if they have, they have chosen not to hear or comprehend the entire scale of what we have been trying to do. Ideally the acoustic ecologist is perceptually open to all soundscapes, driven by curiosity to know and understand any soundscape, its context and its inner relationships and workings.

Whatever knowledge is gained through this very complex process (in addition to understanding as much as possible about the various sciences of sound) would ideally establish an intelligent and inspirational environment for discussion and action. Obviously the soundscape is not a dualistic world divided into nature (good and quiet) and city (bad and noisy). Silence and noise can be enriching, enlivening or oppressive and damaging. It depends entirely on context. To understand all the intricacies and communicative complexities of sound requires constant attention and study. The more we listen, the more we deepen our understanding of context and our relationship to the soundscape.

**ER. Do you believe your compositions capture a memory or trace of a place and how do you think a sonic memory differs from that of a visual memory?**

HW. Soundscape recordings are excerpts of moments in time, nothing else. But in their potential to be heard over and over again, they allow us to focus on this moment and extend it, deepen it in our perception, deepen even the memory of it. Of course they could have the opposite effect and focus our memory on that moment only and forget all the other sonic moments that were not recorded. It could mean a potential decline of our natural aural memory because we may tend to rely on 'play back', i.e. always available repetition. I think it depends very much on how each individual chooses to work with the recordings. At the same time I am convinced that memory cannot be replaced by anything. Memory stays active if we apply it actively, whether to heard sounds (unrecorded) or recorded sounds (which of course are also heard)

My compositions, based on such recorded excerpts, are conceived as times for heightened listening, an opportunity to connect more deeply to a place, a sonic moment or situation, in fact to ones own associations. Some listeners will

connect, others may not, for whatever reason. Ideally, so I hope as a composer, this experience, like any sonic/musical experience, may allow the listener to return refreshed, or with changed perspective into the places of daily life. Daily life echoes in my pieces and the piece echoes in daily life, resonates.

I don't know how sonic and visual memory differ from each other. Intuitively I would say that a sonic memory is remembered time passing. Sonic memory puts us into a time frame, a reflective state, in which time passes in resonance with the memory itself. Visual memory may be more instantaneous in its appearance and disappearance.

**ER. 'Soundwalking' is a large part of your process, can you tell us a little about what soundwalking is, its aims and how and where it fits into your practice and compositions?**

HW. My answer could be a whole dissertation. Perhaps I could point listeners to some links and readings. On my own website:

<http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/writings%20page/articles%20pages/soundwalking.html>

<http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/writings%20page/articles%20pages/soundsecology2.html>

<http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/bibliography/bibliography.html>

click on: McCartney, Andra. 1999. *Sounding Places: Situated Conversations through the Soundscape Work of Hildegard Westerkamp*, Dissertation, York University, Toronto and read Chapter Six

"Soundwalking as Subjectivity in Environment: *Kits Beach and Queen Elizabeth Park*"

**ER. Looking back, can you distinguish where your interest for sound and**

**the environment came from?**

HW. It was always there but was made conscious when I first met Murray Schafer and subsequently worked with the WSP, researching for the *Tuning of the World* among other things.

Before that my parents had made me aware of the environment from early on in the German/European context where I grew up, both on the micro level (care for and knowledge of plants and animals in our immediate environment) and the macro level (understanding and being a critical observer of the relationship between civilisation and nature). This may have set the stage for the deep resonance I felt towards Schafer's approach to the soundscape.

**ER. The soundscape compositions you produce have a beautiful quality of pulling the listeners ear, in and out of worlds, both real and imagined, where do you locate your practice between the real/representational phonographic tradition as opposed to an evoked or imaginary soundscape?**

HW. On the edge between the two, always balancing, traversing the relationship between the real and imaginary, the inner and the outer worlds.

**ER. How do you go about balancing the subjective and objective ear in recording a place of personal significance?**

HW. I don't believe there is such a thing as an objective ear. There may be an ear that perceives the sounds/soundscapes like a culturally shared experience, as part of a community. But within that each of us have our very own subjective relationship to place and to listening itself.

I record what interests me and welcome what the environment gives me. I

don't prepare. I simply go when it feels right to record. The place itself and my experience of it at that moment will determine the flow of my recording process.

**ER. Can you offer a personal distinction between quiet & silence?**

HW. Quiet can be a state of mind and heart, a pause, a place of calm and repose, or a soundscape full of sounds, subtle liveliness. A quiet place is not necessarily silent. Silence implies stillness, nothing moving. It can be an expansive soundscape that allows us to hear far, expansive also in the sense of inhabiting new possibilities, inspiration. But silence can also be empty, oppressive and fearful.

**ER. And finally as always, Ear Room asks, what does the term sound art mean to you?**

HW. That I am free to do what I want to do with sound! It is a liberating term, free of constraints of classical music traditions as well as of visual art traditions. Many sound artists come from the visual arts and experience sound art as a liberation from the silence of galleries and museums. It has given them licence to use sound as an expressive medium and insert noise, sound and music into a traditionally silent medium.

