
On A Clear Day I Can Hear Forever

Author: Gary Ferrington

I live in a city. Not a big city, but one large enough to have an array of traffic and human made sounds that can irritate one if allowed.

There are still quiet mornings. But the fact is that the quality of this quiet time has diminished over the years as the city has grown.

Sometime around 3 AM and continuing for several hours more, the soundscape beyond my closed windows settles into a momentary period of quietude, broken occasionally by a passing auto.

This is a safe time. A time when one can open the windows and let the inside and outside become a single acoustics space.

It is daylight at this time in the Summer. The birds have already started to vocalize and this quickly becomes a morning chorus. I've never made the time to identify each species, but I never-the-less enjoy their collective voices.

This brief period of relative peacefulness is broken with the gruff arrival of the morning garbage truck. It's hydraulic drive lifts a heavy dumpster up and over it's cab. With a screaming assist from the truck's engine all of the collective waste crashes into the truck's gaping hold. Another two minutes of whining sounds and the dumpster settles back to the earth with a distinctive thud on pavement. The truck departs. But the solitude has changed.

The sound of tire friction against pavement increases as commuters begin their weekday driving rituals. An occasional siren marks and emergency somewhere in the city. Gradually, the songfest of morning birds fades and is lost in the human sound of the cityscape.

I am not one that is totally displeased with the sounds of my city. In many ways the sounds generated by cars on wet streets, or human voices from the sidewalk ten floors below provides a connectedness between myself and an active living world. In fact residing in a high rise apartment provides me with an opportunity to listen to the city in a way that might other wise be impossible to do. Here above the trees and having no other tall buildings around is a space through which distant sounds easily travel.

As I write this article, I hear the horn of a Southern Pacific locomotive some three miles away. The sound of the railroad is such a dominate feature of this city that I've actually learned the engineer's code for approaching a grade crossing, pulling into and out of the depot, and when one train meets and passes another. I know, from listening, the length of a train, its progress through the city and whether it is carrying passengers or freight.

Interestingly enough I've also learned the acoustic schedule of the many airline flights to and from Denver and Salt lake. The 6:10 AM flight is always prompt in leaving providing there are no delays in it's planned flight to Colorado. Often, given the stillness of morning, I can hear it's engines deep thundering roar for ten to fifteen minutes after it

passes overhead flying East over the distant Cascade mountain range. On a cloudy day the sound is amplified and appears more foreboding as it passes.

Come late evening the planes return like birds returning to roost until the light of morning again calls them to take flight. One by one their distant sound is heard and their landing pattern takes them high above my apartment.

It's Sunday and though the commuter traffic this morning is not as intense as it will be tomorrow, it never-the-less forms an ambient background against which any other sound needs to make itself heard. St. Mary's church is one such soundmark. It's original bronze bell brings a soft mellow sound to the ear. It's resonance is not as strong as I imagine it once was in calling the faithful to worship. But it can still be heard within the Parish it serves.

On the other had, the bigger and recently refurbished carillon of the Presbyterian church rings clear even against the ambiance of it's worshipers leaving by car for home or Sunday brunch. This soundmark rises above the city in a tall bell tower allowing the ringing to waft across the city.

When not calling its members to church the carillon chimes out the hour in increments of time from early morning until 10 PM when a city ordinance restricts sound making until the next day. It's tolling now tells me that as I write it is a quarter past the hour.

The sound of the wind is one which is always present in my city. There is a prevailing flow of air from the Northwest which blows most every day. It often brings storms from the coast some sixty miles away. In summer it cools the air heated by the pavement of streets and sidewalks. It also bends the trees and rustles the leaves causing a pleasing, restful sound.

The wind also plays with our tall building which is a definite obstacle in it's path through the city. It squeals and whistles as it blows through opened doors and down hallways or finds its way through unsealed windows. This is especially chilling to hear in the winter while the snow falls outside.

Though I can hear and enjoy the sound of children playing in the distant park, the sound of a crow flying past my window, people chatting over coffee at the market a block away, or skateboarders and bicyclist passing by, it is the absences of these sounds in winter that impresses me the most. When the snow falls and the traffic stops the city becomes strangely quiet.

It's in these brief periods of time that I can hear the very distant Willamette river flowing on its journey to the Pacific. It is a time when I think I can hear forever.

About the author:

Gary Ferrington is a Senior Instructor in media literacy and technology at the University of Oregon's College of Education. He is currently a member of the WFAE restructuring committee and serves as the webmaster for the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology.
