



**SAY SOMETHING ABOUT MUSIC...**  
**by Hildegard Westerkamp**

"Say something about music" was one of the guidelines for guest editorials of the Canadian music magazine SoundNotes, for which a shorter version of this article was written originally.

*I imagine the reader looking at this page. All ear. Listening to these words. Hearing this writing. Listening to the sounds I am making at this moment on this page.*

*I am hearing many words. So many words. Spoken by so many voices. Inside me. I am listening to them. At this moment while they move from inside to outside. Incomprehensibly.*

*I imagine the meeting of these words with those ears. So many meetings in so many places. Words wanting to resonate. Ears wanting to be nourished. In the place where they meet.*

*Listen to the meeting. Is it about music? Is it saying something?*

**About Stravinsky's Music**

I remember attending lectures about Stravinsky's music while studying in Germany in the late 1960s. Not knowing much about 20th-century music at that point, I had probably only heard one or two pieces by Stravinsky. Most other students were in a similar situation. The whole semester was devoted to his music, but not once did the professor play a musical example. He said a great deal about it, with much detail and knowledge, even passion. But since his words did not hook on to a musical sound in my memory they also produced no meaning for me.

Needless to say, I have remembered nothing of that lecture series. The professor had made the assumption that we knew the music, that it was deeply entrenched in our inner hearing, so that as soon as we heard the word Stravinsky we would "hear" the characteristic sounds of his music during the lectures.

*I imagine such a lecture now, 31 years later. How would my ears receive it now? Now, that I hear his music when the word Stravinsky is spoken?*

*I imagine the reader listening to names of other composers right now: John Cage - Hildegard von Bingen - Luciano Berio - Sofia Gubaidulina - Toru Takemitsu - Pauline Oliveros - R. Murray Schafer - Laetitia Sonami ---*

*What does the reader hear, now, that I made those other word-sounds on this page?*

**About Muzak**

Imagine that at this moment we are meeting in a shopping mall. Muzak flows through our bloodstream like junk-food, right into the hair-cells of our innermost hearing. Unlike the word "Stravinsky", the word "muzak", I am convinced, conjures up its sound for all readers without any problem. More people on this North American continent share knowledge about muzak than about any other kind of music. I do not mean intellectual knowledge, educated knowledge. I mean a deeper knowledge, deep like a swamp, pervading our whole being: body, mind and soul. We can't help but sink into it when we hear it. It's part of our life, like clothes, like the smell of hamburgers.

I had a dream about a fast-music place - sort of a MacDonald's for music. It was a place for tourists. There were instruments that were made available. Everyone was trying to make music together. But nobody had much time. So, nobody bothered to tune their instruments. Nobody listened.

*Muzak is now occupying the readers' ears. I know it is. The meeting on this page between*

readers' experiences and my words places muzak at the centre of our hearing at this very moment. You and I are sharing the same sonic moment. Let's really listen to it.

*The Muzak Corporation does not want us to listen. It likes to seduce us into moving to its designed rhythms. It wants to rock us into comfort inside its sonic presence, into a community of obedient consumers. Never listening.*

*So. Let's continue to meet on these pages and listen. Even to muzak. Or let's disrupt muzak's rhythms and its numbing lullabies at this very moment and listen to totally different words.*

### **About Indian Weddings and Silent Night**

It's the season of weddings in India. We are witnessing a glittering, rich version from the rooftop terrace of our hotel. Some relative of the Maharaja of Udaipur is getting married. Musical sounds are floating up to us from where the guests are gathering to receive the bridegroom. Gradually distant band sounds start mingling with the music below: drums, trumpets and euphoniums are approaching from our left, getting louder and at times covering up the other music.

We can see the band now, a whole procession of instruments, lights and people accompanying the bridegroom who is arriving on a magnificently decorated elephant. A majestic scene, but the music sounds just as raunchy as at any ordinary Indian wedding. On the street below another small procession of uniformed musicians enters the already dense musical soundscape with its own strangely incoherent wedding band sound and disappears again around the next corner.

Another wedding procession announces itself with explosions from firecrackers, two glittering bridegrooms on horseback and huge musical clamour. This time there is no live band. Instead one of those loudspeaker-carts is pushed through the streets and blasts out similarly raunchy music with max reverb, in tandem with the live band still playing at the other wedding. I can't help but think of Charles Ives' music as I hear all this.

Cars, scooters, auto rickshaws are not deterred and squeeze past the procession, honking their way through the music-filled street. In the middle of all this, as if there was still room for more sounds, we suddenly hear electronic fragments of *Silent Night*. The source: a small passenger car. Every time the driver puts the car in reverse gear, this electronic signal is turned on, continuing the tune of *Silent Night* wherever it had stopped the last time he drove backwards. As the driver maneuvers the car back and forth, back and forth in a small alleyway, we are ear witnesses for several minutes to *Silent Night* being ripped into small, sonic shreds.

*I imagine the reader who has just heard the words Indian Wedding and Silent Night - sound words threatening to tear us into cultural fragments, our ears divided by acoustic contradictions, sonic samples from around the world disturbing our cushioned and comfortable North American ears.*

*Listen to your ears. Open the door of the building in which you live, step out and listen. Walk and listen. Stop and listen. Go around the next corner and listen. Find a favourite spot in your neighbourhood and listen. Don't speak to anyone. Walk on and listen.*

### **About Chronos Kristalla by LaMonte Young**

During Montreal Musiques Actuelles 1990, the Kronos Quartet played *Chronos Kristalla (Time Crystals)* by LaMonte Young in the Spectrum, a one-and-a-half-hour-long quartet of slightly amplified sustained harmonics in a large dark space that throbbed with air-conditioning and electrical hums, where people sat at tables and talked, where drinks were served, where human commotion was part of this social scene.

I loved the experience. But most people hated it, including the composer. For them the space interfered with their ability to fully enjoy the music. I loved it precisely because of the way the sounds of the piece occupied this space. The high harmonics, sustained over 90 minutes, gave a somewhat ethereal focus to this hollow, dark space. In fact, it seemed to brighten it with some warm, shimmering light. With my ears drawn to the ever-changing high frequencies, I was fascinated by how this focus shifted my perception of the air-conditioning and the people's sounds. I don't usually like the sound of air-conditioning in concert situations, but here it was almost as if the soundscape and the music never interfered with each other. They not only existed quite peacefully side by side but they actually enhanced each other. The music seemed



to happen on an entirely different plane than the rest of the sounds, and yet it carried my ears safely, as if on a small light beam, through all the dark corners of the Spectrum's soundscape.

*Chronos Kristalla* also offered breathing room from the aural overload so typical for most music festivals. It "spoke" to an area in my psyche that had been screaming for space, and it seemed to cleanse that area in my brain that resonates most strongly when I sing high tones. It offered an acoustic/musical balance to everything else that was happening around it.

*Listen.*

*Words  
on this printed page  
are sound.*

*Listen.*

*The quiet voice  
on this printed page  
is sound.*

*Listen.*

*Life  
in your neighbourhood  
is sound.*

*Listen.*

*Put aside one hour and go for a walk in your neighbourhood. Do nothing but listen. If you are walking with someone or several people, make clear to them that this hour is spent in silence with each other. Listening together to everything.*

### **Have I Said Something Yet? About Music?**

I often love it when the soundscape makes itself heard during a contemporary music performance. In fact, I delight in it. Especially when individual sounds like a car-horn, a siren, a bird-call, a train-horn, people's voices, or a single, passing motor-bike reach into the concert hall. It is as if the windows have been opened for a short moment and the music has been placed squarely into a larger sonic space and we, the listeners, are reminded of where we are. Everyday life and cultural activity are meeting in a magical sonic moment, no matter how hard the organizers tried to separate them.

But all too often these moments are perceived as "interference". Ironically, in our eagerness to prevent such interference and to isolate musical performance from the acoustic environment, much of our music is put into air-tight, artificially lit places, where the music ends up competing with the hums of air-conditioning and electrical systems anyway - where it is more than ever encircled by the most bland of urban soundscapes. Is that not an interference? In fact, in such situations the air-conditioning functions as a soundwall, that obscures the musical subtleties and silences inside the concert hall, and masks the often interesting "real-life" sounds that could otherwise reach in from outside the concert hall.

*Listen*

*for voices  
while walking.*

*Listen*

*for pauses.*

*Listen.*

*There are sounds because it is this time of the day.*

*Stop and listen*

### **About Bridge Music**

Now we are meeting for a walk across the Alexander Bridge in Ottawa, an interprovincial bridge taking us from Ontario to Quebec, from Ottawa to Hull. As we are walking across we are listening to a fascinating contemporary piece of music. My first experience of it occurred after a visit to the Museum of Civilization in Hull, where I had attended a public rehearsal of Kokoro Dance with Robert Rosen's music.

I am standing outside of the museum watching an artificial waterfall rushing down along the building's periphery when I hear a faint, eerie wind sound behind the water sound. It is quite a windy day and I am assuming that it is the wind howling between the pillars of the museum

wall. But the longer I listen the less I can find a connection between the patterns of the wind gusts and those of the sound. After a few minutes I walk on and suddenly, as I walk around the building I hear the same wind sound more loudly and clearly. It is not wind that is producing the sound. It is the traffic on the Alexander Bridge. It had echoed off the museum wall. Now I hear it in stereo, with the direct sound from the bridge in my left ear and the reflected sound from the museum in my right ear.

By now I am obsessed with the sound. It is an everchanging chord as uninterrupted as the traffic, but with a musical richness and internal rhythmical variety that I have never heard in any traffic sound. As I walk closer to the bridge the chord gets louder, richer and more "colourful". It masks the motor sounds. I walk underneath the bridge and see what produces the music. One of the lanes is unpaved and the surface consists of nothing but raw metal mesh. Every car, depending on its weight, its speed and the type of tires produces a different chord. And the bridge, made entirely of metal, functions like a large resonator. There are no repetitions in this piece of music as the many different vehicles weave a multitimbral tapestry with their chords across this bridge, punctuated by occasional metal clanks.

On my way back across the bridge, my ears are completely caught up inside the piece. In fact, I have no ears for anything else, not even for my thoughts. But up here, I can also hear the car motors. Undoubtedly the best seat for the concert is underneath the bridge on the grassy parkland in Hull.

*Stop for a moment and listen to your thoughts. Let them pass like the sound of a car. Follow them until you cannot hear them any longer.*

#### **About Music and Soundscape**

I am certain that the open rehearsal in the museum had sensitized me to hearing the bridge music. Here a group of artists had dared to not only have a public rehearsal, but had purposely placed their art, the music and the dance, into the context of regular museum hours, meeting real-life situations, and not being afraid that everyday sounds and the public would "interfere" with the rehearsal. Quite the opposite: the rehearsal had intensified my perception of the environment in general. All my senses were more present and my ears were alerted to every detail in the soundscape.

I imagine the reader at this moment listening to 20th-century music - or composing or playing it - with open windows. Listening to the relationship between music and soundscape. To the dance. The interaction. Deeply listening to that place where music and soundscape meet. In us. In society.

Imagine finding or creating the places where music and soundscape enhance one another. Rejecting those places where they have to compete with each other.

*Did you hear the sounds*

*of this place*

*of this time*

*in your life?*

*This place on these pages*

*in your place of reading?*

*Put aside another hour on another day and go for a walk in your neighbourhood. Do nothing but listen*

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