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Writings

Soundscape Composition⁽¹⁾ : Linking Inner and Outer Worlds

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The following thoughts were sparked by the large spectrum of pieces submitted to the Soundscapes voor 2000 competition of soundscape compositions. I listened to them all as a member of the selection jury. "Soundscape as a musical style" was the only theme or guiding idea that was given to participating composers and jury members alike. The absence of more detailed selection criteria and definitions made me thoughtful about the fact that, to date, there have been few attempts to define soundscape composition as a genre; to articulate its significance and position in relation to contemporary music, electro-acoustic composition and experimental radio production; to highlight its potential in enhancing listening awareness; and to understand its role in inspiring ideas about balanced soundscapes and acoustic ecology. The few written pieces that do exist, such as Katherine Norman's⁽²⁾ and Barry Truax's⁽³⁾ articles as well as Andra McCartney's dissertation⁽⁴⁾, address many of the above ideas and create an understanding for the deeper issues underlying the creation of soundscape compositions. They raise awareness about the type of listening these compositions encourage in an overloaded sound world that challenges us to take a stance both as listener and composer. I have taken inspiration from their writings and will be quoting from some of them here, as their different ways of speaking about soundscape compositions create a broader base for discussing this relatively new genre of contemporary composition.

Since audio technology enables everyone who has access to it, to make good quality recordings of *any* sound in the world, the sound environment has become a huge and rich 'resource' for anyone interested in working with environmental sounds. *All*sounds can become part of a soundscape composition. But can a piece be called a soundscape composition just because it uses environmental sounds as its source material?

Soundscape composition as I discuss it in this context, exists exclusively in the electroacoustic realm. We can only hear it if we have sound equipment, loudspeakers and electricity. In other words, it exists in the same realm as all the voices, musics, and other sounds that we hear daily on radios, TVs, films, videos, CDs, websites in many private, public and commercial environments. Our *acoustic* environment, which in itself can be dense and noisy, is populated with these additional *electroacoustic* sounds. Although this situation is perceived as 'natural' and 'normal' by many, it can also have a disorienting effect and create a sense of unreality. Murray Schafer appropriately calls this a 'schizophonic' listening experience, which is characterized by the fact that the sound source always originates in another place than where it is heard and often produces a mood or atmosphere that is out of context of the listener's physical location. Whether that place is an urban centre or a remote village

(with electricity), acoustic and electroacoustic soundscapes are intermingled randomly throughout any day of the year in many parts of the world and the listener's "sense of place" may become confused and uprooted.

How then does soundscape composition fit inside this sonic labyrinth? Does it not contribute to an even deeper disorientation in this growing sound maze? Or can it, in fact, create a meaningful place for listener *and* composer despite the fact that it is experienced schizophrenically? In the face of wide-spread commercial media and leased music corporations, who strategically try to use the schizophrenic medium to transport potential customers into a state of aural *unawareness* and *unconscious* behaviour and ultimately into the act of spending money—in the face of such forces the soundscape composition can and should perhaps create a strong oppositional place of *conscious* listening. Rather than lulling us into false comfort, it can make use of the schizophrenic medium to awaken our curiosity and to create a desire for deeper knowledge and information about our own as well as other places and cultures. It is a forum for us as composers to 'speak back' to problematic 'voices' in the soundscape, to deepen our relationship to positive forces in our surroundings or to comment on many other aspects of a society. Rather than disorienting us, such work potentially creates a clearer sense of place and belonging for both composer and listener, since the essence of soundscape composition is the artistic, sonic transmission of meanings about place, time, environment and listening perception.

A soundscape composition is *always* rooted in themes of the sound environment. It is never abstract. Recorded environmental sounds are its 'instruments', and they may be heard both unprocessed and processed. Some soundscape works are created entirely with unprocessed sounds and their compositional process occurs in the specific ways in which the sounds are selected, edited, mixed and organized. These pieces lean towards what I would call soundscape narrative or document. Other compositions may be created pre-dominantly with processed sounds. But in order for these to be heard as soundscape compositions the abstracted sounds must in some way make audible their relationship to their original source, or to a place, time or situation. Yet other compositions may be created with a combination of unprocessed and processed sounds. But whatever the continuity is or the proportions are between the real (unprocessed) and the abstract (processed) sounds, the essence of soundscape composition lies in the *relationship* between the two and how this relationship inside the composition informs both composer and listener about place, time and situation. A piece cannot be called a soundscape composition if it uses environmental sound as material for abstract sound explorations only, without any reference to the sonic environment.

In the soundscape composition ... it is precisely the *environmental context* that is preserved, enhanced and exploited by the composer. The listener's past experience, associations, and patterns of soundscape perception are called upon by the composer and thereby integrated within the compositional strategy. Part of the composer's intent may also be to enhance the listener's awareness of environmental sound.⁽⁵⁾

Soundscape composition is as much a comment on the environment as it is a revelation of the composer's sonic visions, experiences, and attitudes towards the soundscape. Audio technology allows us as composers to sort out the many impressions that we encounter in an often chaotic, difficult sound world. If "listening is as much a 'material' for the composer as the sounds themselves,"⁽⁶⁾ as Katherine Norman claims, then daily sound impressions play a significant role in the compositional process itself. Equally one can assume for audiences listening to such compositions, that the experience of conscious soundscape listening in daily life would add significantly to the understanding of and involvement with a soundscape composition. Composers and listeners then share the activity of listening as an important ingredient for making sense of the sound environment as well as of soundscape composition.

In fact it *dependson* our listening participation and invites us - through our active, imaginative engagement with 'ordinary' sounds - to contribute, creatively to the music...As listeners, and composers, we may return to real life disturbed, excited and challenged on a spiritual and social plane by a music with hands-on relevance to both our inner and outer lives.(7)

Audio technology allows us to use environmental sound as a type of language that has its own set of meanings depending on the context within which it occurs or into which we place it in a composition. The soundscape composer may use it like a writer uses words in order to comment on the essential characteristics of a soundscape and heighten the listener's perception of it. Or alternately the composer may work with it like a caricaturist who exaggerates the contours, say, of a person's face and thus sharpens the viewer's perception of it; or like a landscape painter who deepens our understanding of and relationship to a place through a certain use of colour, light and shadow; or like a photographer who zooms in on the details not visible to the naked eye. In the same way the soundscape composer can draw our ears more deeply into the contours of sound, its colours and textures and into its details, and thereby enrich our perceptions of and change our attitudes towards our daily sound environment. This type of composition and what Katherine Norman calls a "real-world work"

....can be seen as a move *away* from the reality, but *through* the reality, that frames our experience of music....While not being realistic, real-world music leaves a door ajar on the reality in which we are situated. I contend that real-world music is not concerned with realism and *cannot* be concerned with realism because it seeks, instead, to initiate a journey which takes us away from our preconceptions, so that we might arrive at a changed, perhaps expanded, appreciation of reality.(8)

The soundscape composition then is a new place of listening, meaningful precisely because of its schizophonic nature and its use of environmental sound surces. Its location is the electroacoustic realm. Speaking from that place with the sounds of our living environments inevitably highlights the world around us and our relationship to it. By riding the edge between real and recorded sounds, original and processed sounds, daily and composed soundscapes it creates a place of balance between inner and outer worlds, reality and imagination. Soundscape listening and composing then are located in the same place as creativity itself: where reality and imagination are in continuous conversation with each other in order to reach beneath the surface of life experience

...real world-music, like poetry, is impelled by a desire to invoke our internal 'flight' of imagination so that, through an imaginative listening to what is 'immanent in the real', we might discover what is immanent in us.(9)

1. When I speak of soundscape composition in this article I refer to tape pieces that are created with recorded environmental sounds. I neither speak of sound installations nor of musical compositions for acoustic or electroacoustic instruments that are composed for specific sites and may address soundscape issues.

2. Katherine Norman, "Real-World Music as Composed Listening", Contemporary Music Review, 1996, Vol. 15, Part 1, pp. 1-27.

3. Barry Truax, "Soundscape, Acoustic Communication and Environmental Sound Composition", Contemporary Music Review, 1996, Vol. 15, Part 1, pp.47-63.

4. Andra McCartney, "Sounding Places: Situated Conversations through the

Soundscape Work of Hildegard Westerkamp", PhD Dissertation, Graduate Programme in Music, York University, 1999.

5. Barry Truax, Acoustic Communication, Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1984, p. 207.

6. Norman, p. 2. 7. Norman, p. 2. 8. Norman, p. 19. 9. Norman, p. 26.

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