

Speaker	Comment	Start
Jan	<p>In your discussions about composition, I had this sense of engagement that I...that I associate with aesthetic engagement, the sort of idea that this aesthetic experience makes you sometimes cry, sometimes laugh, that's evoked by the soundscape composition. So I wondered if you could comment just a little bit on the interplay between the communicative and sort of community aspects of your work in soundscapes with the kind of aesthetics in soundscape composition.</p>	02:59:34;07
Barry	<p>That is a really difficult and very deep kind of question. I've tackled it - just for the record - in a recent article for Organised Sound and the subtitle is "The Aesthetic Dilemma", okay. So I've been thinking about this a lot, well I've really been thinking about it for 35 years, right. In a way, it also is something where I think if you want to talk about the difference in my approach and Schafer's approach that's one of the themes where you're going to find a kind of difference. For me personally, which has been the exploration, well as I say, I said right from the very beginning, you know, I had music and technology, electroacoustic music, and then coming to the School of Communication, adding the social science approach. Initially, computer music that was over there, and analog more soundscape oriented things were over here for reasons that were largely technical, were very much apart. And so, ever since about 1990 we can see them very strongly coming together and the way we can use environmental materials within electroacoustic music and we don't even talk about computer music now even though the processing I do is entirely digital, things like granular time stretching, and convolution for instance, and resonators, my favourite techniques that I use. I've also talked about the principles of soundscape composition, that they're about something in the real world, real world context, they have not been abstracted.</p>	03:00:21;21

Barry	<p>So, at the ends, music and acousmatic music is largely at the abstract end, and phonography is largely at the mimetic end of things that are, you know, documents of reality. Admittedly, any document requires lots of choices - you know, what you record, how you put it together - but basically it's not abstracted in any way, shape, or form. So soundscape composition is definitely moving in that in between. So we can talk about it either from the point of view of the composing, which I've been sort of sketching with soundscape, but you can also talk about the theory of acoustic communication, acoustic ecology, where it has a much larger, more really almost political dimension to it. So the question then is what do musicians who want to take some kind of environmental responsibility, what - this is the theme of my article by the way, there's gonna be one that's going to be in an online journal, Moebius, that talks about the ethical aspects of that - one way you can say is that well, if young musicians or composers want to be useful and apply their knowledge and special skills to real world issues that they find relevant, you know, what can they bring to it? Well, they may say, "well, but gee, I just learned piano and harmony and rhythm and pitch detection, and that has nothing to do with the real world", well, that's largely true, right. We know in the west we can abstract music entirely from context, and it was the radical musicologist like Susan McClary and John Shepherd in the eighties that got that title because they had the temerity to say that music had a social context, right.</p>	03:01:50;21
Barry	<p>So there's a lot of resistance historically, of course younger musicologists, they've gone way past that thanks to the pioneering work of people like McClary, right. So music though has been more anchored in the abstract. But, on the other hand, listening is central to both, or should be anyway, right. And then practical issues like hearing loss, I mean, which I go into in this article, is clearly that. And then of course that's [sic] the skills that you may already have to bring that kind of sensitivity which, arguably, the rest of the world may not have in acute supply. I think that was why Schafer initially had more influence on musicians and music students such as us, although that wasn't entirely the case, there were people that weren't necessarily musically oriented. But I think that was his inspiration, was that as a musician's ear, and one of his, you know, catch phrases, that still rings very true, is if composers, particularly of contemporary music are expecting their listeners at 8 o'clock in a concert hall to appreciate their highly refined and abstract material when they're not listening the other 22 hours of the day, you know, to exaggerate and generalize about the noise environment, there's something wrong here. And so he started in education, you know, composer in the classroom. So he was very much moving towards the idea that the artist would have some social responsibility in education, and then perhaps taking a stand about noise pollution as difficult as that was, and then more positively, documenting the soundscape, creating soundwalks, and soundwalking has become an incredibly enduring and powerful tool for both education and now for research as well. Memory walks and so on, there's [sic] so many aspects of it that have contributed.</p>	03:03:44;05

Barry	<p>So that's where, you know, the thing, like the soundwalk or the soundscape composition shows where the two things come together. The musician's sensitivity, perhaps aesthetics, but the pitfall is are you going to overly aestheticize it, is that your main...right? Cause we get excited by aesthetics, right, the aesthetic beauty and value, and sonic pleasure of these...and are we doing this and ignoring the social role of it? And then do we for instance do like visual designers, "well we'll put a sound sculpture in this to beautify the place" right? That's the pitfall that I'm talking about. Fortunately communication, to me, gets you out of that or gets you beyond that, right, in some ways by standing back and not making aesthetic judgments. I try to not make, to make very few aesthetic judgments about any topic in acoustic communication or personal lifestyles for instance, what you listen to, I don't care what you listen to, say music-wise or media-wise, or things like that. You're trying to get to a larger thing about relationships and that sort of thing. So in a way, I have found personally from a theoretical point of view that that largely gets you out of that. And this of course has been, now we're so far into this work, that social scientists particularly criticize Schafer's model by being overly aesthetic. The one phrase was "The Tuning of the World pretends to be descriptive but it's really prescriptive", and even the title "The Tuning of the World", right, that was the original title in the Knopf publication, right. And it's true, he wants to re-tune the world with an army of soundscape ecologists, right, and inevitably then I think if you do that, it's perilously close to the aesthetic criteria as opposed to the more functional criteria that I would say a communicational approach might take, right. And it does tend to judge sounds as good or bad, right, that's not really what it's about. Sounds aren't inherently good or bad, right, it's what their implications are, what their effects could be, how the way they function that either has a positive functioning or a negative functioning, right. But you have to get to that next level.</p>	03:05:41;17
Barry	<p>So as a kind of the self-appointed theorist of the group, right, and being fortunately in this new School of Communication, that is what's given to me the intellectual underpinning for us to actually deal with that aesthetic pitfall. You want the good part of it, the musician's sensibility, and their aesthetic sensitivity, and the sense of design, is design composition? You know, and of course Schafer was very much a proponent of the Bauhaus, which was applied aesthetic design, cause we're not the first to deal with this, right, he very much was aware of that and essentially held it up as a positive aspect. But on the other hand his language, and his prescriptive thing, and also perhaps idealizing silence for instance, as, you know, obviously a needed phenomenon in the world since there's so little of it particularly mentally, but still it raised, it did not solve the aesthetic issues that we've been working out ever since.</p>	03:08:08;05

Barry	<p>So soundscape composition gives you a practical opportunity to deal with this in your own way. And I'm not going to prescribe composition even if Schafer prescribes what's a good sonic environment, the hi-fi environment right, which is his buzz phrase for the good environment, lo-fi was bad, right. Like most of his work, it has a rhetorical appeal that immediately communicates and people love it and they get the idea right away. It doesn't bear more theoretical or critical scrutiny. Let's face it. Well it was never intended to, I don't think, you know, it was, you know, rhetorical devices that he used, coining words - soundscape or lo-fi, appropriating ironically hi-fi, lo-fi from audio which he was very skeptical about. But you know, they're difficult things to do, so you want the good part of the musician, but you want people other than musicians, you want other people to have aesthetic sensitivity, the kind of sensitivity to sound, I mean that is what is all in common is good listening, and it's just that musicians supposedly practice it, although frankly, you know, piano players don't generally get taught a whole lot about listening skills, it's more vocalists and instrumentalists where they can control the sound right, or score analysis, right. There's [sic] a lot of things that don't promote listening, but there's a lot of things that do. So you just have to extend it, just like electroacoustic music, acousmatic music, even though it's abstract, it was, you know, "all power to the listener", you know, it's all listening judgments of abstract sounds, sound objects that you listen to as an object for listening out of context. So they did it by having the sound object, listening was your basis for then where to go with that sound as you process it, because it's only sound for its own sake, right, so that's why it's so specialized. But they threw away context at the same time, at least in general, I mean many of the younger composers started, you know, referring back to context because it's so powerful.</p>	
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Barry	<p>So, trying to do all of the above, to have, you know, the aesthetic principles of balance, I often think of a lot of my so-called soundscape pieces, which I don't really categorize them all - some are clearly, easily labeled that, others it depends on the company they keep, you could listen to them as soundscape, but you could listen to them...like you could listen to "Riverrun"- is that a soundscape composition or not, you know? Well you can listen to it as if it were, you know, the river metaphor and all that, even though there's not the slightest bit of water sound in it, it's all granular textures. So it's not just a labeling of it, it is how you listen to it quite clearly. But where I was going with that is that the soundscape itself, the soundscape composition itself, allows you to have a variety of approaches to referencing real world contexts, right, and that's its challenge and its great open-endedness that we're still working through. And hopefully then, on the hope for the future, because it is very popular now and we find that there's quite an appetite for it and people who would never go to an electroacoustic concert and sit in the dark - not that they all are, but they could be - right, people would never go to a specialized thing like that where explosions can happen all the time as sound for its own sake, right, it's a very specialized taste and of course I love that music but I know that it's limited in terms of its specialized consumption, right, it's an acquired taste like string quartets or something, right. But soundscape composition engages people on their own experience, and so that's the fundamental thing about communication that then you have going for you. And the challenge for the composer, the student composer, is well, you have to use your own associations with that, your own knowledge about that context, and let it guide you, because you're not going to do it on pitch relationships that are you know, orchestration, you going to have to have context guide you. And I find that, of course, very powerful, because then it can be the real world, and the imaginary world, and then you lead people through these journeys, and I do the, you know, fixed on tape, but it could be easily done in interactive installations or even the game world or, you know, audiovisual types of things, there's no end of the media representations.</p>	
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Barry	So, given the popularity of it, that there's a lot of interest in it, given that even the academics from the social sciences are starting to understanding aural culture and auditory culture, and that environmental activists in the WFAE realize that this kind of documentation is powerful, I think there is a very good reason to be optimistic about the future of all of this and that as a tool. So soundscape composition and soundwalking as the on-the-ground, literally, techniques, these two are extremely interrelated of course, cause a soundscape composition can emulate a soundwalk, right, and the soundwalk itself, I've often argued, is a form of real time composition. You know, you are simultaneously the performer, the composer, and the listener, right. You're choosing what to listen to, how to listen to it, how the time progression goes, whether you go to a denser or more harmonious or different kind of environment, it's literally real time composition, and all it requires is a good pair of ears and perhaps a little bit of, you know, mentoring or guiding to get you started at the beginning. So all of these things bode well for a practical solution for the aesthetic and the social, right, and soundwalking and soundscape composition I think are really central to that, as well as things like individual documentation, self-documentation, all these handheld devices right, you could start to do your own documentation, right, and use that to reflect on your relation and so on and so forth. Several of the grad students are using these techniques as well. So a lot of activity that's moving, you know, I think into some new territory aided by this technology that we've been struggling with, and hopefully there will still be room for composers, they're not going to be totally off out there on the periphery of the periphery of the periphery, which they are in contemporary music.	03:13:52;04
Jan	Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add?	03:15:52;02
Barry	I've said so much, as usual. All my students know that, you know, "it's hard to get him to shut up, he knows too much" [laughs]	03:15:54;25
Jan	Thank you so much.	03:16:02;00
Barry	I've enjoyed it, as you see, it's one of my favourite topics, and it's something that I just think is both personally very satisfying and I think bodes well for all kinds of future directions, so, you know, that's my only real concern now, is making sure that this continues at SFU, you know, after I retire.	03:16:04;05
Jan	Thank you.	03:16:24;25
Barry	You're welcome, my pleasure.	03:16:25;25