

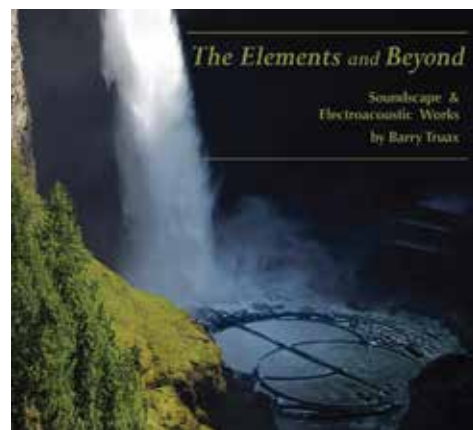
## Reviews (continued)

### An Album of Environmental Force: *The Elements and Beyond: Soundscape & Electroacoustic Works.*

Barry Truax, Cambridge Street Records CD CSR 1401, 2014,  
62 minutes

For Barry, on the occasion of his retirement from Simon Fraser University

Reviewed by Tyler Kinnear



*The Elements and Beyond*: Cover Art

**T**he *Elements and Beyond* marks Barry Truax's ninth solo album.<sup>1</sup> At 62 minutes in duration, the CD features compositions informed by water (*Chalice Well* 2009), fire (*Fire Spirits* 2010), air (*Aeolian Voices* 2013), earth (*Earth and Steel* 2013), and the spiritual realm as described by computer scientist and mathematician Alan Turing (*From the Unseen World* 2012). The first four works are soundscape compositions for eight digital soundtracks, while the fifth is for piano and six digital soundtracks. Each soundscape composition is context-based, where the referential aspects of found sounds refer to a space, real or imagined. Both *Chalice Well* and *Aeolian Voices* suggest physical movement through a hyper-real environment. *Chalice Well* traverses a series of cavernous chambers beneath the said resting place of the Holy Grail, Glastonbury Tor, a landmark of Glastonbury, England. *Aeolian Voices* moves from an outdoor rural setting to inside a shed and ends with a windstorm. In contrast, *Fire Spirits* and *Earth and Steel* remain fixed to a particular location, a fiery underworld and a dockyard respectively. With a relatively stationary position, time plays a greater role. For instance, *Earth and Steel* begins in a historical soundscape, moves to an abstracted space of steel resonance, and concludes in a museum context.

The source material for *The Elements and Beyond* is drawn primarily from original recordings in the World Soundscape Project Database (WSP).<sup>2</sup> These include some of the water sounds in *Chalice Well*, the match strike in *Fire Spirits*, different wind-surface interactions in *Aeolian Voices*, and shipbuilders hammering steel in *Earth and Steel*. *From the Unseen World* is the exception to this use of environmental sounds; here, the six soundtracks are rendered from the six-note "Christopher" motive in the piano, played by Truax. Human presence is audible in several works (e.g., human voice in *Fire Spirits*, passing car in *Aeolian Voices*, steelwork in *Earth and Steel*); however, it is non-human sounds associated with the terrestrial elements that dominate these virtual soundscapes. For example, water sounds (whether identifiable or not) are present throughout *Chalice Well*, including the glass chamber, where convolution is used to create glass-like droplets that function like water. In *Earth and Steel*, the sound of a hammer striking the steel hull of a ship is abstracted such that the human action that produced it is unrecognizable.

With WSP recordings and a few others as his source material, Truax creates a series of sonic environments imbued with symbolism and myth. He employs his signature granulation along with convolu-

tion and other processing techniques in order to realize these spaces. Granulation is effectively employed in *The Elements and Beyond* as both a broadband sound (e.g., wind through trees in *Aeolian Voices*) and also as minute sound events (e.g., sporadic sparks in *Fire Spirits*). Convolution plays a new role in *The Elements and Beyond*. Where Truax has previously used convolution to incorporate space into sound design, starting with *Temple* (2002), this process of reducing noise in a given sound while bringing out its prominent frequencies is repeated multiple times with environmental sounds in *The Elements and Beyond*. The result, as Truax explains: "gives the sounds both a realistic quality (even though they are heavily processed), and an almost symbolic quality."<sup>3</sup> This simultaneity of real-world phenomena and gentle abstraction colours the elements in a way that is not possible through standard processing techniques. Like myth, Truax's hybrid sounds lie somewhere between real-world experience and another dimension. The space between real and abstracted is illuminated when an unprocessed sound is heard next to a hybrid version of the same sound. This theme of superimposition carries over to the album design. On the cover is a waterfall with the Chalice Well in place of its pool, and on the disk itself is a black-and-white image of a steel ship (from

#### CORRECTION TO SOUNDSCAPE 13 (1)

P. 28, Anthony Magen's review "*Reflections on Ways of Listening, Figures of Thought: a Festschrift for R. Murray Schafer on the Occasion of His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday*" should read (in the third column under Introductory Essay):

'translation by Norbert Ruebsaat' – not Reassart.

*This revision, as well as other updates/corrections, are reflected in the web version.*

the WSP Database) with a colour image of rock columns affixed to its hull.

Regarding soundscape composition's commitment to the real-world significance of prerecorded sounds, *The Elements and Beyond* invites audiences to make environmental and social associations and to connect what they hear to their own personal experiences. According to Truax:

The intent for me is to provoke a reflective listening...which gives you time and space to not just listen inside the sound, but also to relate it to your own experience. Hence, I regard soundscape composition as a subset of what might be called context-based approaches, keeping in mind that these are not always physical, social, or cultural contexts. They could also be inner kinds of context, in the sense of memory and recall.<sup>4</sup>

In order to create environments that encourage reflective listening, the audience is invited into these works as observers. Although I felt like an active participant in each composition, especially when there was a shift in spatial depth or a sense of movement through space, there were rarely moments where I imagined myself making sounds.

At a time when many sonic artists are using found sounds to invite listeners to consider real-world environments and conditions, Barry Truax reminds us of the importance of taking time to listen inwardly. *The Elements and Beyond* exemplifies that technology can heighten our awareness of real-world environmental sounds at the same time as it transports us to places of meaning and myth. The four elements are simultaneously raw material and symbolic substance in *The Elements and Beyond*. The five compositions on the CD are studies in timbre, time, and texture as well as acoustic journeys into different environments. With attention to both the sonic properties and the external significance of source material, this album has the potential to enrich how listeners experience environmental sounds and acoustic spaces in daily life. With *The Elements and Beyond*, Truax does not merely sketch mythic locales, he invites us to experience them firsthand.

### About the Author

TYLER KINNEAR is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of British Columbia. His research focuses on contemporary sonic art, with particular interest in conceptualizations of nature, phonography, soundscape composition, modes of listening, and alternative performance spaces.

### Endnotes

1. In preparation for this review, I interviewed Truax about *The Elements and Beyond* in the context of his 45 years working in soundscape composition. The full interview (unedited) is available on the World Soundscape Project Database. Email Truax at [truax@sfu.edu](mailto:truax@sfu.edu) for a guest password to the Database. All quotes in this review are from the interview. For more information on *The Elements and Beyond* visit <http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/cd10.html>.
2. In addition, *Chalice Well* uses prerecorded sounds provided by sonic artists Damián Keller and David Monacchi, as mentioned on Truax's webpage on the work. It is plausible that these water and glass sounds were used in Keller's "...soretes de punta" (1998) and Monacchi's *Stati d'Acqua* (2006).
3. Barry Truax, Skype interview by author, March 4, 2015.
4. Ibid. For a rich discussion of reflective listening, see Katharine Norman, "Real-World Music as Composed Listening," *Contemporary Music Review* 15, 1 (1996), 1–27.

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