

Soundscape composition: the convergence of ethnography and acousmatic music

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Despite roots in acoustic ecology and soundscape studies, the practice and study of soundscape composition is often grouped with, or has grown out of the acousmatic music tradition. This can be observed in the positioning of soundscape compositions juxtaposed with acousmatic music compositions in concert programmes, CD compilations and university syllabuses. Not only does this positioning inform how soundscape composition is listened to, but also how it is produced, sonically and philosophically. If the making and presenting of representations of environmental sound is of fundamental concern to the soundscape artist, then it must be addressed. As this methodological issue is outside of previous musical concerns, to this degree, we must look to other disciplines that are primarily engaged with the making of representation, and that have thoroughly questioned what it is to make and present representations in the world today. One such discipline is ethnography. After briefly charting the genesis of soundscape composition and its underlying principles and motivations, the rest of the paper will present and develop one perspective, that of considering soundscape composition as ethnography.

1. SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION AS SONIC TOURISM / SONIC FETISHISM

A frequently voiced disparaging criticism of the genre of acousmatic art that has been positioned under the rubric of 'soundscape composition', is that its generation and presentation is an act of 'sonic tourism', where the concert performance is akin to a public showing of personal holiday slides. Or, if not 'sonic tourism', rather 'sonic fetishism', where the artist is seen to attach an irrational reverence over recorded and reproduced sound, and its organisation. And, as a result of these purported predilections, sounds' functioning within such work relies heavily on the environmental contexts from which they were originally extrapolated, making, according to the composer Francisco López, the work a less musical one than it could have been otherwise. He posits:

There can only be a documentary or communicative reason to keep the cause-object relationship in the work with soundscapes, never an artistic / musical one. Actually, I am

convinced that the more this relationship is kept, the less musical the work will be. (López 2000).¹

Michel Chion points his finger in this regard at his composer colleagues at the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales*:

The composers of the GRM tended to Fetishisms which have to do principally with focussing attention on the sources of the sounds and the means whereby they are produced, whereas the sounds themselves are what really count, and they can be made in any and every way. (Chion 1993: 53)

In this paper, I will claim that such comments derive from established acousmatic music aesthetics.² Although in many soundscape compositions there is considerable procedural crossover with other acousmatic musics, the notion of soundscape composition can have significantly distinct concerns and consequently may be appreciated and explored more fully if approached from different perspectives to that normally associated with acousmatic music.

2. WHAT IS SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION?

Of course, elemental to the definition of soundscape composition is the underlying concept of 'soundscape'. In the definitive *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology* (1999), 'soundscape' is defined as:

An environment of sound (or sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by an

¹Although López' work derives from environmental recordings, his call is for, 'a profound, pure, "blind" listening of sounds, freed (as much as possible) of procedural, contextual or intentional levels of reference' (López 2001). In an acousmatic work such as *Buildings [New York]* (2001), unprocessed environmental recordings of 'sonic matter from inner sound environments of buildings in New York' (López 2001) are crossfaded in and out of each other. López offers the listener details of the sounds' sources (location, date and time, and the time they appear in the work) sealed shut in the CD booklet. He recommends that the listener keep them closed.

²Such established acousmatic music aesthetics referred to are outlined in 'Is there a Québec sound?' (Dhomont 1996). For further reading see: *Musique Acousmatique: propositions ... positions* (Bayle 1993), *La musique électroacoustique: 'Que sais-je?'* (Chion 1982), *The Language of Electroacoustic Music* (Emmerson 1986), *A la recherche d'une musique concrète* (Schaeffer 1952), *On Sonic Art* (Wishart 1996).

individual, or by a society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment. The term may refer to actual environments or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an artificial environment. (Truax 1999)

Although there is an ongoing debate as to the nature of soundscape composition's philosophic and aesthetic underpinnings – a debate which is central to this paper – this author has found Barry Truax's succinct divisions of the characteristics of soundscape compositions into four points to be the most workable and the least aesthetically pre- or pro-scriptive. These four points are:

- (1) Listener recognisability of the source material is maintained, even if it subsequently undergoes transformation;
- (2) The listener's knowledge of the environmental and psychological context of the soundscape material is invoked and encouraged to complete the network of meanings ascribed to the music;
- (3) The composer's knowledge of the environmental and psychological context of the soundscape material is allowed to influence the shape of the composition at every level, and ultimately the composition is inseparable from some or all of those aspects of reality;
- (4) The work enhances our understanding of the world, and its influence carries over into everyday perceptual habits. (Truax 2000)

Such concerns for working with the sounds of the environment – and engaging in how they impact on us and we on it – sprung out of the World Soundscape Project, inaugurated at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in the early 1970s, and the accompanying development of the interdisciplines of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies. A principal research tool employed by the group was audio recording media. In 1973, the WSP produced a double LP and booklet, documenting the sounds and discursive outcomes of their study of Vancouver, entitled *The Vancouver Soundscape*. In this landmark survey of a city's sounds, each of the tracks explores different audible aspects of the city: its geography, its people, its identity. The director of the WSP at that time, R. Murray Schafer included this introductory message to the listener with the original LP:

To record sounds is to put a frame around them. Just as a photograph frames a visual environment, which may be inspected at leisure and in detail, so a recording isolates an acoustic environment and makes it a repeatable event for study purposes. The recording of acoustic environments is not new, but it often takes considerable listening experience to begin to perceive their details accurately. A complex sensation may seem bland or boring if listened to carelessly. We hope, therefore, that listeners will discover new sounds with each replay of the records in this set – particularly the

first record, which consists of some quite intricate environments. It may be useful to turn off the room lights or to use headphones, if available. Each of the sequences on these recordings has its own direction and tempo. They are part of the World Symphony. The rest is outside your front door. (Schafer 1973)

In the episode entitled *The Music of Horns and Whistles* you can hear a condensed collage of field recordings of sixteen different horns and whistles captured from throughout Vancouver at different times and spliced together; an experience only made possible with audio recording, editing, mixing and playback equipment. As well as evocative intentions, such work veered away from scientific study towards more aesthetic concerns such as shaping, pacing, and pitch relationships. These interests could be interpreted as communicating some sense of musical coherence. It is perhaps not surprising that a genre of music came out of a social science research group that consisted almost entirely of composers. Prominent members such as R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp have gone on to contribute pivotal soundscape compositions.

Around the same period, in Europe environmental sound waves were emanating from the heart of the acousmatic music world at the GRM in Paris, produced by Luc Ferrari who was presenting works such as *Presque Rien N° 1 ou le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (1970). This work comprised highlights of a seamlessly edited environmental sound recording taken from a fixed point in a Yugoslavian village throughout the duration of one day. Such work (as the opening Chion and López quotes suggest) flew in the face of the GRM's Schaefferian phenomenological precepts of attention to the intrinsic qualities of recorded sound (i.e. the sound-object). Ferrari's work, on the other hand, focused on what he referred to as the 'anecdotal' qualities of recorded sound (Ferrari interviewed by Robindoré 1998: 11).

Despite roots in acoustic ecology and soundscape studies, today the practice and study of soundscape composition is often grouped with, or has grown out of acousmatic music schools. This can be clearly observed in the positioning of soundscape compositions juxtaposed with acousmatic music compositions in concert programmes, CD compilations and university syllabuses. Not only does this positioning inform how soundscape composition is listened to, but also how it is produced, sonically and philosophically. In such work we can observe a common aesthetic – attention to pitch and rhythmic relationships, cause-and-effect structuring, approach to form, reliance on digital technologies – that derives from the acousmatic music tradition. Such work may impart to the listener the artist's musical intuition, proficiency of the medium, aesthetic preference, etc., but nevertheless is often devoid of any thinking concerning the making of representations and consequently power

relations. If the making and presenting of representations of environmental sound is of fundamental concern to the soundscape artist, as is implied throughout Truax's definition of soundscape composition above, then it must, along with the other compositional issues, be addressed. As this methodological and conceptual issue is outside of previous musical concerns, to this degree we must look to other disciplines that are primarily engaged with the making of representation, and that have thoroughly questioned what it is to make and present representations in the complex world of today. One such discipline is ethnography.

3. WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

The discipline of ethnography is the principal source of data for cultural anthropology. Ethnography is a qualitative research method based on direct observation of and reporting on a community or social group's way of life: their values, beliefs and social rules. Unlike many other fields of social research, ethnographic research examines entire environments, looking at their subjects of study in context, on location.

The first stage in ethnographic study is participant observation, where the researcher goes into the field, acquiring first-hand experience by actively or interactively participating in that society's day-to-day life. In practice, this means looking and listening, but it may even involve actual participation in whatever is going on. The ethnographer may also collect documentary material such as photographs and sound recordings, as well as writing down the observations. Ordinarily, this would be conducted over an extended period of time in order for the society to get used to an outsider observing and enquiring into their day-to-day activities.

The second stage is often face-to-face interviewing in the field with members of the society, although some ethnographies are completely derived from participant observation. There are methodological procedures concerning how to interview in the field in order to yield reliable and fruitful data: i.e. how to instigate interviews, when to interject or intervene disrupting the flow.

A third stage may comprise examining archives. This can be very broad, looking into every form of documentation and artefacts, e.g. letters, photographs, diaries, previous ethnographic and historical studies and other relevant data from whatever discipline.

The final stage is producing a report on the findings and conclusions on the society studied by the researcher. This normally takes the form of an academic report or paper to be presented at conferences on ethnography and published in accredited academic journals dedicated to the study of ethnography.

In sharp contrast to other academic disciplines, ethnography embraces the subjective sensuous experience of the researcher. Dwight Conquergood writes:

[Ethnography] privileges the body as a site of knowing . . . Ethnography is an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing. The embodied ethnographer is the instrument. (Conquergood 1991: 180)

However acknowledging, as John Berger puts it, 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe' (Berger 1973: 8), ethnography continuously calls for a high level of self-awareness, where the elements of subjectivity should be recognised and revealed in the report. Accordingly, an ongoing process of reflexivity is required to be put into play.

In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. (Davies 1999: 4)

To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment. By extension, the reflexive ethnographer does not simply report 'facts' or 'truths' but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about. The outcome of reflexive social science is reflexive knowledge: statements that provide insight on the workings of the social world and insight on how that knowledge came into existence. By bringing subject and object back into the same space authors give their audience the opportunity to evaluate them as 'situated actors' (active participants in the process of meaning creation). (Hertz 1997: viii)

4. THE REDEFINITION OF ETHNOGRAPHY

For ethnography to remain a viable discipline at all in a post-modern and post-colonial world, it has had to undergo an in-depth examination and redefinition of its cultural role and its research methodologies.

There were a number of problems with standard ethnographic practice:

- (1) Coupled with imperialism, the historical predicament of ethnography is that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures (Clifford 1986: 2). Such invention is informed by the literary procedures that pervade the ethnographic report, notwithstanding the ethnographer's ideologies and agenda, often with the overriding ambition to 'tell a good story'.
- (2) The textual practice in ethnography, which concerns the translation of an alien culture into a written academic language (predominantly English), describes a society in such a way that, the chances are, members of that society will probably not be able to appreciate. Such a practice is in the service of the ethnographer's society, not the native's.
- (3) The ethnographer goes to great lengths in fieldwork to share activities, and time with the society being studied, acknowledging the members of the society

as contemporaries. However, the written report (i.e. the outcome of the fieldwork), is temporally and culturally distanced from that society through labels such as tribal, traditional, ancient, animistic, primitive, preliterate (Conquergood 1991: 182).

Johannes Fabien's solutions to these deep-rooted quandaries were:

- (1) To challenge ethnographers to rethink themselves as communicators, not scientists. Ethnographers must recognise that fieldwork is a form of communicative interaction with an Other, one that must be carried out coevally, on the basis of shared intersubjective time and intersocietal cotemporaneity. To shift from textualised space to co-experienced time (Conquergood 1991: 183).
- (2) To rethink ethnography as primarily about speaking and listening, instead of observing. Sight and observation go with space, and the spatial practice of division, separation, compartmentalisation and surveillance. Metaphors of sound, on the other hand, privilege temporal process, proximity and incorporation. The communicative praxis of speaking, listening and conversation demands copresence even as it decentres the categories of knower and known. Vulnerability and self-disclosure are enabled through conversation (Conquergood 1991: 183).

Talal Asad offers up the new possibilities of other forms of outcome from the ethnographic study from that of the academic report.

If Benjamin was right in proposing that translation may require not a mechanical reproduction of the original but a harmonization with its *intentio*, it follows that there is no reason why this should be done only in the same mode. Indeed, it could be argued that 'translating' an alien form of life, another culture, is not always done best through the representational discourse of ethnography, that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. (Clifford 1986: 156)

To sum up, the proposition is that a new ethnography which is relevant to today's world dynamics requires a shift from sight and vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from monologue to dialogue, from authority to vulnerability (Conquergood 1991: 183).

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually – as objects, theatres, texts – it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphor for ethnography shifts away from the observing eye and towards expressive speech (and gesture). The writer's 'voice' pervades and situates the analysis, and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced. (Clifford 1986: 12)

5. THE ARTIST AS ETHNOGRAPHER

The notion of considering the artist as ethnographer (or pseudo-ethnographer) is not a new one. James Clifford writes that:

As an academic practice [ethnography] can not be separated from anthropology. Seen more generally, it is simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation. (Clifford 1988: 9)

Due to the renewed engagement with actual social sites and themes by artists, the art critic Hal Foster, in *The Return of the Real* (1996) has noted tendencies in the New York neo-avant-garde art of the 1990s towards ethnographic territory. Foster reiterates some of the points concerning ethnographic practice already touched on in this paper, however this time in an arts practice context:

- (1) ... artists and critics be familiar not only with the structure of each culture well enough to map it, but also with its history well enough to narrate it. Thus if one wishes to work on AIDS, one must understand not only the discursive *breadth* but also the historical *depth* of AIDS representations. (Foster 1996: 202)
- (2) I have stressed that reflexivity is needed to protect against an over-identification with the other that may compromise this otherness... this over-identification may alienate the other further if it does not allow for the othering already at work in the representation. In the face of these dangers – of too little or too much distance – I have advocated a parallaxic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other. (Foster 1996: 203)

ETHNOGRAPHY AND SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION

Reading through the outline of contemporary and projected ethnographic practices and their methodological theories above, we can immediately find comparisons with the practice and theory of soundscape composition. Both disciplines engage in embodied open-air-research rather than arm-chair-research, focusing on fieldwork primarily through sensuous experience and the creation of an outward response to that experience from the inside. Both are interdisciplinary contextual enquiries which take a greater holistic approach to the environment and its people. Both are tied up with translating their findings into condensed, itinerant forms.

Through its criticism, ethnography can offer the practice of soundscape composition ways to move forward in a relevant and socially functional way, which reflects the complexities of today's cultures. Primarily, this could mean a greater reflexive mode of operation for the composer, questioning and divulging what he or she may

previously have regarded as givens, for example compositional processes and audio manipulations that previously lay transparent could be exposed and discussed within the work. An example of such divulging can be experienced in Hildegard Westerkamp's acousmatic music composition, *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989). The voiceover of the composer gently explains the techniques employed whilst they audibly happen, such as the filtering out of the otherwise ever-present 'acoustic backdrop' (Westerkamp 1996) of the city of Vancouver on the beach.

As discussed in the first part of this paper, a common facet of soundscape composition is that acousmatic music aesthetics and its concomitant technical innovation drive work. Such work bears little correspondence to the site of study, unless that site is where acousmatic music is a feature of the prevailing culture,³ otherwise, such work will convey to the listener more about the composer's cultural clique and listening habits than of the intended field of study. Critical reflexivity should expose such tendencies and offer solutions. Perhaps through the unfolding of the work, artefacts derived from acousmatic music aesthetics could be peeled away.

A contemporary ethnographic approach to soundscape composition may require that the composer displace authorship of the work, engaging in a collaborative process, facilitating the local inhabitants to speak for themselves in 'an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances'. The final work should be made available to those that it explores, and their responses should be acknowledged and heard, activating a dialogue rather than a one-way communication. *Your Favourite London Sounds* (2001) compiled by Peter Cusack, is such a work. The public has nominated all the sounds on the CD. On a number of the tracks, members of the public are heard explaining their favourite sounds on Cusack's answerphone or are heard *in situ*, speaking from within the soundscape that they have chosen in dialogue with Cusack. In the CD booklet, all the places, times and recording scenarios are given, as well as all the names of the public who participated in the project. The TESE (Touring Exhibition of Sound Environments) project on the Isles of Harris and Lewis, directed by Gregg Wagstaff, takes this process even further by engaging the public in creating their own 'sonic portraits' (i.e. soundscape compositions) of their sounds.

Shifting the visual bias, soundscape composition practice perhaps can offer ethnographic practice alternative models of cultural poetics: that of the analytical and creative tools for grasping at the sound world. Perhaps as Talal Asad hinted at, we may well find ethnographers

generating and presenting what the electroacoustic community would recognise as a soundscape composition, as a pertinent substitute to writing an academic ethnographic report and *vice versa*. In Steven Feld's work, we find just that.

7. ACOUSTEMOLOGY

Since Edmund Carpenter's pioneering work on 'acoustic space' in the 1950s⁴ there appears to have been a considerable hiatus in soundscape-orientated research in ethnography.⁵ One outstanding practitioner who has endeavoured to advance the study of soundscape in an anthropological/ethnographic context is Steven Feld. His point of departure was to research:

Ways sound and sounding link environment, language, and musical experience and expression. (Feld 1994: 2)

Feld's groundbreaking intensive fieldwork in this endeavour was in the rainforests of south central Papua New Guinea with the Kaluli people of Bosavi in 1976–7. He studied their ritualised vocal expressions in context, observing how their voices mimicked the rainforest birds. As birds to the Kaluli represent spirits, the mimicking of the birds: 'recall and evoke the presence in being a bird' (Feld 1994: 2). Also, the texts of the Kaluli songs 'sequentially name places and co-occurring environmental features of vegetation, light and sound' (Feld 1994: 2). Thus he surmised that 'the ecology of natural sounds is central to a local musical ecology, and how this ecology maps onto the rainforest environment' (Feld 1994: 2).

Through this and further studies of the Kaluli people and their environment, Feld has devised an anthropological concept that he has termed acoustemology:

[Acoustemology explores] acoustic knowing as a centrepiece of Kaluli experience; how sounding and the sensual, bodily, experiencing of sound is a special kind of knowing, or put differently, how sonic sensibility is basic to experiential truth in the Bosavi forests. Sounds emerge from and are perceptually centred in place, not to mention sung with, to, and about places. Just as 'life takes place' so does sound; thus more and more my experiential accounts of the Kaluli sound world have become acoustic studies of how senses make place and places make sense. (Feld 1994: 4)

Feld has released a CD of an assemblage of field recordings that evoke the day in the life of Bosavi and the Kaluli in *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991). In this work, we can observe the fertile blurring of

⁴See 'Acoustic space' (Carpenter 1960).

⁵Currently there appears to be a renewed and rapidly developing interest in soundscape issues in the field of ethnography. At *Sound Practice: the 1st UKISC Conference on Sound, Culture and Environments* at Dartington College of Arts and Dartington Hall, UK, in February 2001, there was a large representation of research from ethnographers, i.e. Ian Dent, Cora Bender and Tom Rice.

³One explicitly written ethnographic study of electroacoustic music culture is Georgina Born's study of the *Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique* (IRCAM) published as *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (1995).

ethnography, soundscape composition and soundscape studies. In discussion with Charles Keil who queries what it means to condense spaced-out, realtime worlds of sound into the one hour CD of *Voices of the Rainforest*, Feld replied:

Voices of the rain forest is simultaneously hyperreal and a tone poem. It's an evocation of a sound world . . . It's not just temporal condensation that frames that editing. It's that time, all these years of my time there, all of this hearing of Kaluli people and their world, and hearing them talk about this, and listening to it with them, travelling around in that place with Kaluli – all that goes into this . . . Soundscape research really should be presented in the form of a musical composition. That is the one way to bend the loop back so that research and the artistry come together and we can auditorially cross those rivers and those creeks and climb those trees and walk those paths without the academic literalism, the print mediation. (Feld 1994: 328)

8. CONCLUSION

A lot of what has been proposed in the paper *vis-à-vis* soundscape composition and ethnography is theoretical. It is only through praxis (i.e. the marriage of theory and practice) that we will realise pertinent means of addressing such propositions as framing 'the framer as he or she frames the other' (Foster 1996: 203). The challenge to soundscape composition artists is whether they can balance musical with representational concerns.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Levack Drever was recently awarded a Ph.D. from Dartington College of Arts in recognition of a programme of work entitled, *Phonographies: Practical and Theoretical Explorations into Composing with Disembodied Sound*. He is a director of the UK and Ireland Soundscape Community (a regional branch of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology) and with the University of Plymouth, TESE and Aune Head Arts he coordinates Sounding Dartmoor, a public arts and ecologically orientated soundscape study of Dartmoor. He is an active acousmatic music and soundscape composition artist with commissions from *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (Paris) and *Mousonturm* (Frankfurt), and is a member of the devised theatre group Blind Ditch. In February 2001, he chaired *Sound Practice: The 1st UKISC Conference on Sound, Culture and Environments*.