

From Thoreau's Concord to our concord with nature ... soundscape composition as conveyor of urgent messages from the world around us

CONVERSING WITH NATURE

Reflections on Hildegard Westerkamp's *Talking Rain*

by sylvia macCormac

... voices singing inside mountain water sky ...



Hildegard Westerkamp's *Talking Rain*, like soundscape composition in general, is about sound and being, acoustics and ecology. The real and ultimate goal is "the re-integration of the listener with the environment in a balanced ecological relationship" (Truax 1996, 63). In finding the innate rhythms and music of soundscapes, composer Hildegard Westerkamp extends the boundaries of artistic expression and recalls the musical origins of nature and inner voice. *Talking Rain* (which can be heard in its entirety on the MUSICWORKS 72 CD) amplifies the still quiet voices of nature and water by placing them in relation to the louder urban din. Contrasting nature and culture, Westerkamp leads the listener's consciousness towards self in place and time with the soundscape surrounding us, investigating where we are located in our listening and soundmaking.

How much of nature's voice is here? How much is brought by the composer and the listener? Hildegard Westerkamp has created a musical and mythical space in which we can listen and imagine, hearing our own and nature's voice. In the act of participating, listening, and soundmaking, thoughtfully and imaginatively, in physical or virtual space, in real or story space, we interact with the composition, its cultural text and our own context. Where we are and how we are listening—in a quiet space or busy subway—will influence our reception and interpretation of the piece. Will it influence us to be more aware of the soundscape and the need for sound ecological balance?

MW CD

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There is more in *Talking Rain* than meets the ear. Seeking insight into the voice of nature and the voice of Hildegard Westerkamp, I traversed the geography of my own soundscape, connecting lines of thought, trying to decipher sound, structure, and significance. I discovered that Westerkamp follows in a musical tradition of finding, creating, and working with sonic materials. And yet, *Talking Rain* is also an open text in which voices of nature meet technology, and spirit meets sound. *Talking Rain* invokes, evokes, and provokes greater awareness and "clairaudience" (R. Murray Schafer's term) calling us toward sound ecology and sound logic, toward the appreciation of the nature of reason and the reason of nature.

Linked with the genre of nature writing through its appreciation of and call to preserve sound ecological balance, *Talking Rain* is a response to the tragedy and the beauty of sounds and noise around us. Just as Thoreau carried with him several items—an old music-book to press plants, his diary and pencil, a spy-glass for birds, a microscope, jack-knife and twine—so soundscape artists carry their field equipment of audio recorder, microphone and headphones, along with pencil, paper, and a conscious decision to think about, to look at, and to listen to the land and soundscape.

Exploring the acoustic landscape both literally and imaginatively, with a naturalist's keen sense of observation, Hildegard Westerkamp—along with other artist/composers—is part of a larger cultural musical movement towards acoustic ecological appreciation, composition, conservation, preservation, compassion, communion, and even correspondence with nature. *Talking Rain* is a composition of living awareness in sonic thought, imagination, and action—both a gift and a call to contemplation. This is music for the wild and for the temple, of nature/body and of culture/mind. *Talking Rain* deals with sound and significance, music and meaning, presence and conscience, thoughts and imagination.

In the chapter called "Sounds" in *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau records and writes of "the language which all things and events speak without metaphor" and of "undisturbed solitude and stillness ... the whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods ... hoot owls ... finding myself beginning with the letters gl when I try to imitate it ... distant rumbling of wagons over bridges—a sound heard farther than almost any other at night ... all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs ... tr-r-r-onk, tr-r-r-onk, tr-r-r-onk! ... only squirrels on the roof and underneath the floor, a whip-poor-will on the ridge pole, a blue jay screeching beneath the window, a hare or woodchuck under the house, a screech owl or a cat owl behind it, a flock of wild geese or a laughing loon on the pond and a fox to bark in the night" (Thoreau 1965, 101–116).

Meanings are evoked where sound expresses all things. Listening to *Talking Rain* or reading Thoreau's text evokes the experience of moving through landscapes and soundscapes. *Talking Rain* is a call to listen to our environment in order to hear that inner voice that is whole and echoed there, in what Westerkamp has referred to as "that connection to nature where the creation of mythology exists" (in conversation with the author, 1998). *Talking Rain* is a soundscape composition in and through which to become aware of the noisy rush of the city and the still beating heart of the natural universe, those drops in the pond and a louder "om." Here the sounds flow through and around, as sound is permeant and fluid, wave particle, matter of a different sort, with simply acoustic and complex significant meanings.

If rain is talking, then what is it saying? What is *Talking*

Rain saying? The title implies language. Language implies meaning and understanding, signifiers and signified. Are there semiotic traces in *Talking Rain*? If there are no semiotic ghosts in *Talking Rain*, where do they reside? In reflection, we can be listening to *Talking Rain*, talking about rain, and talking about talking. Talking about nature—if nature is talking, what is it saying? What are the myriad rhythms within rain? Westerkamp's *Talking Rain* has the aesthetics of music as well as having sound as signifier in a communicative sense, where sound and music affect us physically, emotionally, and psychologically; wherein auditory thought, memory, and imagination are evoked; where we are in relation to sound.

Talking Rain. Talking about rain. Talking about talking. Talking. Talking about rain, water, nature, and culture. Talking about self. Rain talking, talking self, talking rhythm and timbre in sound, recording, writing and composing, documenting and working with materials at hand, fixing sound to the audio medium. Here, where water is text and text has meaning, *Talking Rain* and soundscapes require taking time to listen. Contemplation is essential to understanding, for *Talking Rain* is a documentation of sound in its environment, and is also a composition of music, water, and myth—that mist and mystery where being is liquid and lucid. Here the trickle of water, there the raven's call, bells ringing soft and long, subtle and clearer still, traffic whizzing by while ancient voices sing out their story. Listening to the music of nature, here the world sings, in sound time informing, transforming, becoming moving vehicles for thoughts and imagination to wander in and wonder out loud. Drop by drop and note by note, soundscape compositions confirm and inform. This is the story space where *Talking Rain* lives.

This is sound sculpture begun with that basic building block, that simple phoneme raindrop—beat of time, grain of, quantum of, DNA of *Talking Rain*'s sound. Here, where water is alive and signifies life, it's fitting that *Talking Rain* begin in a quiet natural space, move towards the city and back again into sounds and thoughts of more natural landscapes, finally closing with footsteps signifying presence ... of composer, listener, or nature? *Talking Rain* contains observations of wild and urban environment, self in nature, nature in self, and just plain rhythm, just good old music, where sound has no syntax and is purely sound to dream upon. Finding that place where there is correspondence between self and nature, where nature is never far from reason and reason is never far from nature and ecology, Westerkamp composes, and Thoreau writes, "Shall I not have intelligence with the Earth?" (Thoreau 1965, 125).

Carving a space for our memories and thoughts to arise, Westerkamp has created a music composition that is aesthetic and communicative of nature, culture and self, invoking and evoking personal and universal myths. Phonemes, phenomenology, and phono ... mythemes, mythology, and music. Like the cascading waterdrops in Hugh LeCaine's *Dripsody*; like Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* and its exploration of isolation and community, spirituality and morality, creativity and place; and like Trevor Wishart's *Redbird*, questioning and evoking questions of nature and reason, the nature of reason and the reason of nature—*Talking Rain* creates a space for contemplation in sound.

Where are we when the music gets louder and the sound of metal and traffic, bells, and the only spoken word, "What?" invokes us to question why? Why did Westerkamp use the word "what?" What does she mean? Would any question do,

as it evokes all other questions? But this "what?" is defensive and challenging in its tone, calling us, shocking us forward into an awareness of our relationship to urbanity and nature, culture and ecology. The bells ring more loudly. Dealing with sound in space, design and ethics, we know that how we build our communities and cities will affect our lives. What we create, watch, and listen to, will also affect us, as will what we put in our bodies and our streams. Too much stress will overtake us. If industrial traffic and toxins, information, and advertising media are too intense we will not be able to hear those quieter sounds and voices, including our own. They, and we, will be lost among the din of our own construction and destruction. Perhaps it is time to understand the acoustic balance that is found in nature, those calming sounds of water and earth. The contemporary author Paula Gunn Allen speaks of this sense of well-being that arises from a connection with the natural landscape and soundscape:

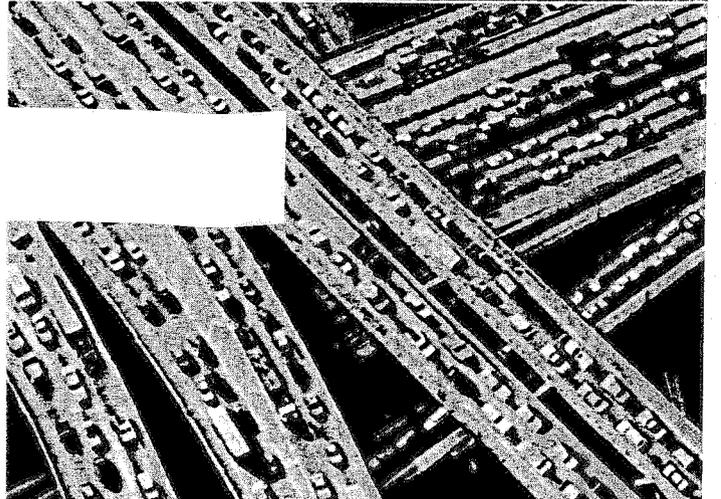
Like my Lebanese relatives I love the mountains and the sea ... like them I feel safest when there is a spring nearby, as there was in my childhood Cubero, a spring I can speak with and know that the sacred sprite who lives within replies (Allen 1991, 99).

Recording audio phenomena and working with sound clips as material to create texts, musical compositions, and sonic story spaces, soundscape composers have found a provocative and evocative way to communicate both real and potential aesthetics and tragedies of culture and nature. We hear the actual voices of nature close-miked and amplified. This is one of the greatest strengths of *Talking Rain*: it is a way into recognition of where we are, a direct link to those places in nature and ourselves where music and mythologies reside, where deep wells spring and transcendence lives. In *Talking Rain*, nature speaks directly and with clarity. *

Talking Rain emphasizes the emergence and emergency of hearing the quiet voices, those which cannot be easily bottled or commodified. Commodify water? Commodify spirit? Commodify rain? And yet, water has indeed been made a commodity. Music has been, also. How many musical lambs have gone to the slaughter under corrupt agendas? We just have to look at the stats to know that "whenever there is music there is money" (Attali 1985, 3). *Talking Rain* seeks to amplify that which is still uncorrupted, that inner voice, those footsteps that lead us on towards deeper wells of wisdom and higher consciousness, to that ever pure pearl of water ... music. A primary goal of soundscape composition is that of enjoying, respecting, and preserving the innate relationship with natural sounds and the ecological balance they imply, inspiring us towards awareness of our environment. By way of aesthetics, it also creates a story space in which to remember our innate relationship to the love of music and sounds, listening and soundmaking.

We are struggling for the survival of simple living, against the noise of commodity culture and corruption of the marketplace with its jingles and its wares. We're weary of the noise, so perhaps it's time to amplify those voices that can barely be heard, to come to greater awareness of the need for sound ecological balance. *Talking Rain* is a mature work for a mature world, willing to listen to and take responsibility for its environment. Soundscape composition can continue to have a positive effect upon the growing consciousness of our society.

We are related to nature and are a part of the ecosystem we



inhabit. We are not separate and therefore anything we do to nature we do to ourselves. Not long ago Chief Seattle wrote of this, saying,

But how can you buy and sell the land? ... If we do not own the presence of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? ... We know the sap that courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins ... All things are connected like the blood that unites us all (Seattle 1990).

Soundscape may guide the way toward a reintegration of the self with the voices of nature and onwards towards music and mythologies both past, present and future. *Talking Rain* is ultimately about our voices as individuals and as a culture in relationship with nature and sound, the nature of sound and the sound of nature.

Can the phoneme of rain, the phenomena of *Talking Rain*, and the phonograph (in the etymological sense of audiowriting, therefore any electroacoustic medium) bring us closer to that which cannot be imparted, but only heard through the inner ear? If the waters of life—our lifeblood that is water—are not clean, not clear, not beloved, but commodified and corrupted, then won't we perish a sure and painful death? If the earth cries and calls for respect, nourishment and compassion, shall we turn a deaf ear to the state of our environment, to the spoiling of the "richness of the landscape and its fruits" (Truax 1996, 63) and to the truth that lies at the very ground of being?

Jill Kerr Conway writes in *True North*,

the sense of nature lies at the ground of our being because it shows us the forces of life by which we are sustained, and demonstrates, more powerfully than any other set of images, the potential for renewal and rebirth.

Pristine water is becoming rare. It is here that the sound of fresh running water becomes significant. If the sounds of pristine headwaters are lost, the smallest of springs will become silent, and inevitably animals will die, birds will die, and we will die. If we lose those signals to our ear which harken of beauty and balance, community and wisdom, we will become drones to a competitive and corrupt society of spirit(s) commodified. As Barry Truax writes,

The soundmark, historical and disappearing sounds, as well as the memories of those who can recall the soundscapes of the past, are all worthy of preservation and respect (Truax [1984] 1994, 96).

Can anyone be naive enough not to question the origin of spring water? When dirty water costs \$2.00 for eight ounces, hasn't something gone wrong with our ecology and economics? Sound tells us where we are, and if we do not have a response to this, we are led like sheep whose tongues have been cut out. Acoustic communication and soundscape composition highlight the fact that we act in concert with environmental sounds. Soundscape composers listen carefully and, as much as they make aesthetic choices in the course of composition, are compelled to act in relation to the sounds themselves. They listen to what the sound is saying and let it dictate the course of the composition. Looking inside the sounds and soundscape, speculating on the nature of sound and being, they are guided by sounds. If it is true that logic lies

in aesthetics and aesthetics in logic, perhaps we would do well to take more guidance from nature. Nature does not take more than it needs. Nature simply lives, and is the best example of a well-balanced acoustic environment. Urban culture, with its noisy agendas, is becoming increasingly stressful, a sonically polluted environment that promotes a state of being cut off from nature (Truax [1984] 1994, 20).

Perhaps it is time that we listen to nature and base our economics on sound ethics. Since "environmental sounds have a language of their own" (Westerkamp, in conversation with the author, 1998), what does nature have to say for itself? What does it have to tell us and teach us regarding economics, ethics, and ecology? Can sound wisdom and balance be lived but never imparted? Perhaps *Talking Rain* is about living in concord, where clarity is essential and flows directly from the pristine waters of life, from the core of the core, from the heart of the earth.

Talking Rain: Stream of Analysis

Talking Rain is located musically around the notes A, B, C#, D#, E, F, G. It begins with rain rhythms of 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 ... 1-2-3 / 1-2-3 / 1-2-3 ... then thunder foregrounded coming into the present, then a truck through a mountain passage transports the listener to another section of the soundscape, to dripping water and the A, C#, E, of birds at the 2:21-minute mark, other birds on E, E, B, others on E, E, E, / G ... a plane in the distance at the 3:00-minute mark ... rain rain 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 transporting, transforming rain, foghorn, rain on roof 1-2-3 / 1-2-3 / 1-2-3 sounding like the rhythm of a train ... rain rain ... 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1 ... faster and faster while foghorn calls C# ... thunder ... more vehicles through tunnels transporting us to ... crystal drops of water and birds A, C#, E to another vehicle as if pulling away ... still all the while this sustained chord of bells, perhaps B and E, in the background ... birds singing multiple layers 1-1-1 / 1 / 1-1-1-1 / 1 at the 5:00-minute point, drops of rain and birds moving around the notes E, E, B / E, E, A. Now there is more rain falling on leaves, drops in pond, C# foghorn, waterdrops, birds, rain-stick panning back and forth across space—yet this is no ordinary percussion instrument made of wood, this is the real-world sound of rain, young raven calls ... rain-stick plays ... water echoing birds, birds echoing water ... then frogs, rain-stick and birds 1-1 / 1-1 / 1 / 1 ... rain-stick and frogs and waterdrops and ripples, rocks dropping in water cascading, a symphony of rain, reminiscent of Hugh Le Caine's *Dripsody*, as the rhythms become very interesting, 1 / 1 / 1-1-1 / 1-1, and this is the sound of rain itself. Around 8:00 minutes, rain on roof and cars coming in at 8:30 and that sustained *basso continuo* chord (is it B and E?) and then 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 / 1-2-3-4 and doubling time ... sound of higher-pitched vehicles rushing by sonically around us, while transformed bells foretell their ringing, dynamically increasing towards the car horn (C#) at 9:55 and the man saying "what?" (E?) aggressively at 10:00, then church bells ringing clearer still and that sustained *continuo* and vehicles in traffic turning to waves around 12:00, and the sound of seagulls ... And I remember Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* and its exploration of isolation and community, spirituality and morality, creativity and place ... C# foghorn and footsteps at 15:40 ... leading to waterdrops and more footsteps, 1-1 / 1 / 1-2-3, bird B, D#, F, 1-1 / 1, footsteps, trickling water, rain-stick, bird A, C#, E, 1-1-1 / 1. Could Beethoven's Fifth Symphony's G, G, G / E and F, F, F / D, have been based on the song of birds? Just as birds mimic our rhythms and sounds, so do composers mimic the soundscape (Emmerson 1986). Could *Talking Rain* be Hildegard Westerkamp's "Fifth Symphony"? E, E, E / G / A, C#, E / E, E, B / C# ending with seashore, seagulls, and footsteps, those birds—E, E, B / E, E, A—water trickle, water text, birds A, C#, E / E, E, B, water, birds, frogs, bells, talking rain ... talking stick ... rain talking ... 1-1 / 1 / 1 / 1 / 1 / 1-1 / 1-1 / 1-1, 1 / 1-1 / 1 / 1 / 1 / 1-1 ... A, A / G / E / G.

Sounds distant and near, memories and thoughts ... fading in and out, passing through, rising and falling ... where the nature of sound and music communicates—what? Wind words, water words, word sounds, water talk, breathing rain, raining on ... that phoneme raindrop signifying life within its very being. Here, *Talking Rain* and soundscape composition are music and mythopoeics. How can this be other than transcendental aesthetics and logic, music and communication? *Talking Rain* (being aware of potential losses while celebrating life) is a documentary of and monument to the existing soundscape.

Through composition we can travel backwards into forests of remembrance and forwards into those inner temples where our own voices and stories live. *Talking Rain* is a story space, a place to compose oneself. Created out of those mists where music and mythopoeics live, *Talking Rain* sonically takes us deep into the forest of consciousness, where liquid water signifies life. *Talking Rain* is transportation for our own thoughts

and imagination, which arise like waters based on something old, something remembered and something new. In *Talking Rain* we are entitled to hear those sounds which resonate with something ancient and with those voices within ourselves which have been silenced or are barely audible. Surely we need a sonically clean environment, and amplification and clairaudience to hear what the rain is saying. What are nature's rhythms and melodies, its reasons and times of ebb and flow? What is nature saying? What is *Talking Rain* saying?

Talking Rain becomes a journey, an exploration, a place where we are invited. There we can immerse ourselves in that musical and mythopoeic place, where the "pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (Thoreau 1965, 266), and further still, with the waters of the west coast of Canada. Here in the composition of nature lies contemplation of ourselves, and a simple life lived in concord comes sounding out and sounding through.

sylvi macCormac's eclectic background includes singing and composing folk music, mask-clown-music ensembles, and film projects with various artists, including Bruce Cockburn. She studies composition with Barry Truax, working with voices, instruments and real-world sounds from her own library, as well as that of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Canada. Her composition Waves of Kokoro, (on the MUSICWORKS 74 CD) was played at the 1999 Bourges Festival International des Musiques et Créations Électroniques. She recently won the 1999 Marcia Music Award for Electroacoustics at Simon Fraser University. macCormac may be reached at sylvia@istar.ca and her web page may be found at www.home.istar.ca/~sylvia.

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RÉSUMÉ FRANÇAIS

La composition de paysages sonores comme porteuse de messages provenant du monde qui nous entoure. La compositrice sylvia macCormac décrit les paysages sonores de Westerkamp comme une musique axée sur le son et l'être, l'acoustique et l'écologie, et dont l'objectif est de permettre la réintégration de l'auditeur à l'environnement au sein d'une relation écologique équilibrée. En mettant en rapport le son de la pluie et le vacarme urbain, *Talking Rain* amplifie la voix de la nature et de l'eau. Quels sont les rythmes et les mélodies de la nature? Les raisons et le rythme de ses mouvements? Que dit la nature? Que dit *Talking Rain*? À travers cette composition de la nature, nous pouvons nous contempler nous-mêmes, et une vie simple et harmonieuse se fait entendre.

