

# To the World Soundscape Project:

A STUDY OF  
THE WORLD SOUNDSCAPE PROJECT

KEIKO TORIGOE

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*Keiko Torigoe*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to initiate a comprehensive study of the World Soundscape Project, to understand its significance in modern society and to evaluate its accomplishments. The first chapter clarifies what aspects of modern acoustic environments led to the establishment of the Project. The Project's concerns include noise pollution, listening attitudes and noisy music. Chapter One also outlines the aims and the strategies the Project set for itself in order to improve the situation. The aims include undertaking interdisciplinary study of acoustic environments, changing and improving acoustic environments, and educating the public. The present writer recognized four major strategies of the Project, that is, conceptual, educational, political and social. The thesis examines several of the Project's basic concepts including "soundscape", "acoustic design" and "acoustic ecology". Later chapters examine the chronological development of the Project and analyze its works in order to determine how the Project tried to fulfill its aims. The history of the Project has been divided into a number of periods, the preparation period, the full-scale operation period, and the stagnation period. The works examined range from such books as The Book of Noise, The Vancouver Soundscape, and Handbook of Acoustic Ecology to the musical piece Okeanos and the radio programme Soundscape of Canada. Finally, the thesis evaluates the accomplishments of the Project. Except for the production of actual acoustic spaces, the Project was found to be quite successful in that it fulfilled the majority of its aims.

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## PREFACE

My interest in the World Soundscape Project and the work of Murray Schafer began six years ago, in 1976, when I read a translation of Schafer's article "The Music of the Environment", published in a Japanese music journal, Transonic. At that time, I was impressed with the article because it showed that someone with a different cultural background was interested in the same environmental questions as I was. Prior to reading this article, I had been exploring similar questions, but using as a basis my own Japanese cultural background. The arts in traditional Japanese culture used to be very environmentally oriented. Generally, pictures and music were appreciated in the same space where our daily activities took place. The change towards introducing such specialized accommodations as galleries and concert halls for the presentation of the arts occurred relatively recently, about a century ago, when Japan began adopting some Western ideas.

Being impressed by Schafer's multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and creative approach, I decided to study his work. Later, through my study, I became aware of the existence of the World Soundscape Project. This Project seemed to be an appropriate subject for the continuation of my studies. Coming to Canada afforded me the opportunity to use the Project's materials and to deal directly with those involved in the Project. It has been an enlightening experience for me to carry out this study in the same country where the World Soundscape Project was developed.

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## INTRODUCTION

The acoustic environment of our daily lives has always had a greater influence on music than has been acknowledged by the mainstream of musicology. Today, the concept of music itself should be enlarged to include the various sounds and noises found in the acoustic environment, since contemporary composers are more and more affected by them. If we fail to expand our understanding of what constitutes music in modern culture, then contemporary music may remain isolated, ignored, and even scorned by audiences and musicologists in our society.

Some of the musicians and composers in the twentieth century have recognized that, by focussing on the acoustic environment of our daily lives, they could attempt to realize a new relationship between music and society as a whole. They have made various radical experiments to expand the vocabulary of sounds and noises in their individual musical compositions and styles. Among the most significant figures are Luigi Russolo with his noise instrument "intonaromori", Eric Satie with his "furniture music", John Cage with his chance music and philosophy of silence and Max Neuhaus with his outdoor installations. A Canadian composer, R. Murray Schafer is one of those composers who has been making efforts to redefine the relationship between "music" and "acoustic environment".

What, then, is the difference between "music" and "acoustic

environment"? In some cases, the distinction is quite vague. For the purpose of the discussion in this thesis, "music" refers to a historical concept which is characterized by the peculiar feature of "autonomy", in the sense that the music confines itself to the space of the concert hall or other enclosed performing spaces. Here, a distinct concept of composition, a "self-sufficient entity", was established. It can be called the "closed composition", and the sounds used in it are "musical tones" which are clearly distinguished from the sounds of daily life. This concept of "music" therefore, means the musical work created by a composer through the manipulation of abstract elements, that is, "musical tones", and ideally, performed in concert halls, or other special spaces insulated from the concerns and functions of daily life. On the other hand, the sounds of daily life, or sounds outside of the concert hall, were considered incompatible with "music", and were called "noise".

Is there then any difference between "noise" and "acoustic environment"? If so, what is it? In the sense that "noise" can broadly mean all kinds of acoustic phenomena which we can hear within a building, in the city, and in the natural environment, "noise" and "acoustic environment" are quite similar. However, while "noise" has always had negative connotations, "acoustic environment" is a neutral term. Also, while "noise" is incompatible with "music", "acoustic environment" can include "music". In fact, the term "acoustic environment"

can be used in several ways, referring to "noise", "music", or "noise" plus "music".

After the efforts of those composers already mentioned, the concept of music should now be considered as having expanded into the "acoustic environment" which includes both "noise" and "music". From this point of view, the present writer is most interested in the "World Soundscape Project" (WSP) established by Murray Schafer over ten years ago. Prior to his establishing the Project, Schafer's work had already been characterized by a multifaceted approach, involving educational, social and environmental concerns within his musical activities. As a composer, he is considered as "one of Canada's most successful composers, one of a few with an international reputation".<sup>1</sup>

Schafer (b. July 18, 1933) studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto and the University of Toronto. He studied piano with Albert Guerrero, composition with John Weinzweig and harpsichord with Greta Kraus. As a student, his interest was not confined to music, but included literature, philosophy, languages and visual arts. In 1956 he left Canada and went to Europe to study music at the Vienna Academy, however, his main activity was studying medieval German language. Minnelieder (1956), chamber music based on medieval German poetic texts,

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<sup>1</sup>Keith MacMillan and John Beckwith, eds. Contemporary Canadian Composers, (Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 119-120.

derives from this period of study. After two years in Vienna, he moved to London, England. In London, he was active as a free-lance journalist working for the BBC, and had opportunities to involve himself in various new European music movements. At this time he became more serious about his own career as a composer. Since his early musical activities, his works have been generally characterized by his strong interest in various languages and eastern thoughts. For example, Four Songs on Texts of Tagore (1958) and Gita (1967) exemplify the influence of eastern philosophies and languages on Schafer's works.

In 1961, he returned to Canada and established the Ten Centuries Concerts in Toronto and became its first president. In 1963, Schafer went to Memorial University as artist-in-residence and started his career as a music educator. Statement in Blue (1964), based on graphic notation, and Epitaph for Moonlight (1968), which uses onomatopoeias created by children to describe moonlight, are results of his educational activities. As a music educator, he also established his reputation with the publication of The Composer in the Classroom (1965), Ear Cleaning (1967) and The New Soundscape (1969). He also has been active in the field of music criticism with such works as British Composers in Interview (1963) and E.T.A. Hoffman and Music (1976).

The WSP is a logical extension of this combination of Schafer's wide ranging concerns. Since it was established, the Project has devoted itself to the study of the acoustic environment beyond the distinction between "noise" and "music".

The present writer has chosen the WSP as the subject of this thesis rather than Schafer's work alone. The reason for this decision is that the environmental concern that Schafer formulated prior to the establishment of the WSP was then refined and developed by the Project. That is to say, after the establishment of the WSP, Schafer's personal ideas were adopted by the Project as a whole, and then developed through the member's cooperative activities. As a result, the original ideas were not confined to Schafer's personal concerns any longer, and they started taking clearer social, and even political, directions than previously. Moreover, the cooperative aspect of the group makes the WSP a unique entity in the contemporary music context.

There exist a number of articles and reviews about the WSP. For example, articles such as "The Soundscape: What it is, How it Works, and Why It's Important" by Louis Giansante provide us with a simple introduction to the activities of the WSP.<sup>2</sup> "The World Soundscape Project Revisited" by Donna Zapf is a recent review of the WSP.<sup>3</sup> It includes a brief history, an introduction to the major works and members of the WSP, together with her own evaluation of the Project's significance. As well, there are other articles on the WSP written by the members

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<sup>2</sup>Louis Giansante, "The Soundscape: What it is, How it Works, and Why It's Important", in Media and Methods, (November, 1979), pp.44-47.

<sup>3</sup>Donna Zapf, "The World Soundscape Project Revisited", in Musicworks, No.15, (Spring, 1981), pp.4-5.

themselves. "Soundscape Studies: An Introduction to the World Soundscape Project" and "The Soundscape and Technology" are articles written by Barry Truax, a member and the present director of the Project.<sup>4</sup> These articles provide a more technical and scholarly perspective of the WSP's work than the others discussed above. However, to date, there have been no comprehensive studies or analyses of the WSP or its works.

Although the more general issue of the relationship between music and environment might be relevant to the topic of this thesis, it is beyond its scope. This thesis intends only to understand the WSP from several perspectives, including its history and major works, aiming at clarifying how it explored the possibilities of expanding the concept of "music" into the larger concept of acoustic environment. The content of the thesis will be divided into three chapters. Chapter One, "Problems, Aims and Strategies of the World Soundscape Project", will focus on a general discussion of the WSP's activities, dealing with the problems of music and acoustic environment identified by the Project, and the aims and strategies the WSP established to solve the problems. Chapter Two, "The History of the World Soundscape Project", provides an overview of the Project's history including the members, research activities, and publications. Chapter Three, "The Analysis of the World

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<sup>4</sup>Barry Truax, "Soundscape Studies: An Introduction to the World Soundscape Project", in Numus West, No.5, (1974), pp.36-39. "The Soundscape and Technology", in Interface, Vol.6 (1977), pp.1-8.

Soundscape Project's Works", will analyze and explain selected samples of the WSP's works. The conclusion will attempt to evaluate the WSP's activities, as well as to understand the general significance of the WSP's existence and works for contemporary society.