

# THE MUSIC OF THE CITY

The Vancouver Soundscape, 2 discs 33 rpm. stereo EPN 186, plus a 72-page booklet. Director: R. Muray Schafer. Contributors: H. Broomfield, B. Davis, P. Huse, C. Miles. Not for sale. Contact R. Muray Schafer, Sound Research Studio, Communication Studies Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. (\$1. Canadian copies on both discs.).

Perhaps only in North America does an institution like the Donner Foundation grant young researchers the thousands of dollars needed to undertake projects that in Europe one might be tempted to dismiss as useless. The Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, who directs the "World Soundscape Project," is perhaps not entirely unknown in France, since the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec performed his *Music for the Morning of the World* at the 1972 Royan Festival. It undoubtedly took a professional musician to take a specific interest in the city's sound environment and take the problem of noise pollution seriously. Of course, the subject is fashionable at a time when ecological issues are preoccupying people's minds, but it is not uninteresting that a team systematically dedicates itself to their sonic aspect.

The "World Soundscape Project" is vast: an inventory of lost or disappearing sounds; an analysis of the representation of sound in literature; new sounds; the structure of radio programming; an analysis of technological noises (whistles, sirens, factories, horns, telephones, etc.); problems of notation, definition, morphology, and analysis of noises; and legal aspects of noise pollution. This is one of five publications from this research group that I am reviewing today: a two-disc album on Vancouver's "soundscape," accompanied by a booklet of commentaries and documents.

Murray Schafer and his colleagues distinguish three components in a city's soundscape: the city's "tone," sound signals, and distinctive sound markers. According to the team, Vancouver's car traffic gives the city its tone, but the noise of electrical equipment competes with it. The average pitch of electronic noise in North America is B natural, in Europe: G sharp. Each city, each country, each continent thus has its own sound color. Signals (train whistles, fire and police sirens) are found in all cities but organized in a specific way. The brochure even presents the score of a fog horn concert in Vancouver Harbor. As for distinctive sounds, these are phenomena encountered only in one place: in the capital of British Columbia [Editor's note: Vancouver is not the capital, but rather the largest city], a horn system plays the first notes of the Canadian anthem at noon...

But the project doesn't just inventory the different forms of urban music. The booklet reports on several surveys on noise, considered by a population of guinea pigs to be pleasant and unpleasant. Of particular note is this interview where residents estimated the number of planes

flying over their homes each day at eight, when in reality there are 65: a sign that we are becoming dramatically accustomed to noise pollution.

Educator Murray Schafer would like us to clean our ears: "Noise pollution sets in when people no longer pay attention to sounds. To overcome background music in department stores, listen to it." The team has thus taken inventory of the city's pleasant sounds: some areas of parks have better sound quality than others, and the authors propose an "acoustic walk" through Vancouver. They plan to publish a Listener's Guide to Good Eating in Vancouver, a sort of Michelin guide to restaurants where the soundscape is as good as the cuisine. Because we are simultaneously the composers, performers, and listeners of the city's music and the world's symphony, we must not only act at the legislative level, but, after having studied and inventoried positive sounds, intervene ourselves in the construction of a quality sound environment. And the team imagines the emergence of a new discipline, acoustic design, which will change the city's musical landscape. Utopia?

A return to nature and a certain Rousseauism constitute the implicit philosophy of the Project: "We must return to the original elements of Vancouver's soundscape: waterfalls, the sound of waves and water, the unmistakable sound of the wind in the trees, and the natural resonances of wood, shells, and stones." Murray Schafer's talk that closes the second disc significantly ends with a splendid concert of frogs, interrupted by the roar of an automobile. And the only work the team created from the recorded sounds is not based on the sounds of the city: *Okeanos* exploits those of the sea.

Shouldn't we ask ourselves why the city has especially inspired painters and writers, and few musicians? Leaving aside the imitative and anecdotal symphony of horns in Gershwin's *An American In Paris*, it was only Varèse who tried to give a poetic dimension to the city's music, precisely by moving the sirens, the squeaks, the hammerings, from sonorous to musical, that is to say, in his childhood, "heard on the Saône, when he wrote *Hyperprism*. "One only has to *listen to this landscape*<sup>1</sup> (that of Villars), writes Odile Vivier, to find the fundamental sonorities of Varèse's music, to detect the structures that would give his works their specific character."<sup>2</sup>

But a single Varèse in a century is not many for a musical poetics of La Cité. Is it only because the New York Burgundian wrote his work at a time when the noise of the city was not yet unbearable? Or, more generally, because the city lacks the power to inspire musicians?

As chance would have it, I became aware of the work of Murray Schafer and his team at the same time as I was reading Pierre Sansot's beautiful book, *Poetics of the City*<sup>3</sup>. The two experiences shed light on each other, and I couldn't resist comparing them. If *Vancouver Soundscape* speaks of a city's own tonality (keyboard), so do Pierre Sansot's informants: "Edmonde Charles-Roux recognized a city by its timbre, a tone that was personal to it. She

associated New York with the distressing wail of police sirens that strikes all its inhabitants... She added that her neighbors recognized their neighborhood by certain noises specific to it.

For their part, Francis Carco in his memoirs, and Jules Romain in *Men of Good Will*, the former evoked certain sounds of Lyon, the latter certain cries of Paris (p. 332). But, quite often, the sounds of Sansot's city are only evident when confronted with silence: "The rain, by the silence it had just created" (p. 93). "Silence worries us in a city... Hence, it seems, one of the causes of the difficulty of living a Sunday in the city - and yet we are warned of what is going to happen to us: the disappearance of this noise that we complained about so much during the week but which assures us that the city continues to exist" (p. 333).

The music of the city? It's mostly background noise, a rumor: "We must distinguish between urban rumor and the cries of the city" (p. 333). For his part, Murray Schafer, drawing inspiration from Gestalt theory, distinguishes between the noises that constitute the acoustic background of the city and those that stand out like figures. We don't listen to the former. I even believe we hear them afterward, when silence prevails. We don't listen to the latter either; we endure them, and what Murray Schafer would like is for us to learn not only to listen to the city in order to retain those of its sounds that stand out for their quality, but also to positively and deliberately construct an aesthetically valuable sonic environment.

This is perhaps where one of the contradictions, let's say a difficulty, of the project lies. Murray Schafer himself points out that a noise is not perceived in the same way in its context or out of its context. Regarding the radio or the telephone, which isolates sounds from their source, he proposes the beautiful expression *schizophony*. When records allow us to hear the characteristic noises of Vancouver in minute detail, are we not in the same situation? What makes a noise heard in the street during a walk not identical to the same acoustic noise collected on magnetic tape is that we experience the latter in a different way: on the record, it emerges from the hushed silence of our apartment, in the same conditions as if we were going to listen to the IX<sup>e</sup>. Is it legitimate, then, to ask us to listen to the music of the city with a musical "listening intention"? When we redesign the urban soundscape, will we listen to it in the same way as music?

It is too early to answer these questions. As far as acoustic design is concerned, I only fear that what will happen to sound is what happened to architecture in Le Corbusier's Chandigarh: once the rationally constructed city was built, "foreign" elements, sacred cows and slums, reappeared. How long would it take for unwanted noise to once again pollute the sonic balance imagined by acoustic designers?

The research of the Vancouver team seems important to me: First, as a sign of the times: that the musicians capture the rumor of the city to study it and, eventually, transform it, testifies to

the shift that has taken place, in the consciousness of the contemporary composer, between the sound and the musical, even if the border varies from one individual to another. Then, on the level of fundamental research, it tackles a field of study that had been totally neglected in the past, and it does not seem superfluous to underline the legal concerns of the team. By identifying all noise nuisances, by even measuring them, Murray Schafer and his collaborators will have the possibility of making precise proposals regarding the modification and progress of current urban legislation on noise. When one begins a research, one generally does not know what its positive repercussions will be. It is not impossible that the dreamers of Vancouver will be the pioneers of a civilization, not only of better being and better living, but also of better hearing.

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1. Emphasis added.

2. O. Vivier, *Varèse*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 5

3. Paris, Klincksieck, 1971, 422p.