COMMENTARY: AURAL HISTORY and THE WORLD SOUNDSCAPE PROJECT

Editor's Note: *The following is a transcript of a conversation between Imbert Orchard, aural historian, currently in the Department of Communication Studies, Simon Fraser University, and two members of the World Soundscape Project research group, Howard Broomfield and Barry Truax. The conversation took place August 7, 1974 at Simon Fraser University, and was centred around the relationship between aural history's attitude toward sound recording, and the environmental sound emphasis of the World Soundscape Project.*

MR. ORCHARD: The way I look at it, there actually is no boundary between aural history and the study of the soundscape. We are all concerned with sounds in general, but you approach a sound, partly for its own sake and partly for what it suggests, what it manifests of social history, of location, of all of the things that are implied in the sound. The sound itself, therefore, is pre-eminent. Whereas from the aural history point of view, speech – what people are saying – is the pre-eminent thing. A person speaking may describe sounds, whereas you are concerned with the sounds themselves, including the sound of the human voice. Of course, I know that your work extends into a concern with speech as the communication of meaning, just as my work extends sometimes into the use of sound for its own sake. Consequently, I feel that there are whole areas where you, the soundscape people, and myself and other aural historians can collaborate and influence each other. I think particularly of your emphasis on the *quality* of sound: the perfection you are striving for. I feel we could together expand the whole sound-speech documentary process into something very rich and comprehensive.

MR. TRUAX: Well, the technology then can be used to help us. We can go from, say, seventy-five years ago, when you would be essentially writing down what you heard, then perhaps you could start recording with the portable phonographs they had, then with the tape recorder single channel, and a limited spectrum. We want to extend this out into as close to a re-creation of an environment, or creation of a new environment, as possible, so we always use two or four channels, and a full frequency spectrum. The whole technological development parallels the kind of interest we have in documenting . . . going from the reduced, one or

two-dimensional aspect of speech or environment to as complete an experience as possible.

MR. ORCHARD: This is indeed aural history, a-u-r-a-l history, sounds of all kinds.

MR. BROOMFIELD: The most important thing that we can concentrate on now is teaching people how to hear, because with so many people you can produce the most beautiful documentary or the most beautiful soundscape, and it goes right by.

MR. TRUAX: If someone doesn't have ears to listen, what is the purpose of all the marvellous sound, if he cannot hear inflection, if he cannot detect a balanced soundscape, or hear the subtleties of space and time as sound creates and molds them. Then what is the point, the listener forces himself to stay with the technology of seventy-five years ago.

MR. ORCHARD: This is one of the things that my association, brief as it is now, with you soundscape people has shown me . . . that whereas before I was concerned with how the sound was ultimately going to be coming out of the loudspeaker in somebody's home. . . that he would be led into sitting down and listening to something I concocted. . . *you* are concerned with the sounds you record, awakening people, sensitizing people to be aware of those sounds as they actually are in life. In other words, you send people back to life itself, time and again, in your soundscape writings, and in *The Vancouver Soundscape* presentation particularly. You talk about them going out and listening for themselves. As a consequence, one of my students told me he was getting much more sensitized to sounds, and in fact he couldn't sleep at nights because sounds were bothering him that he'd never heard before.

MR. TRUAX: Now he may do something about it! You see, this is the catch. If people start listening, then they'll discover how awful certain sounds are, where the sounds they do want to listen to are and what intrudes upon them.

MR. ORCHARD: Aural history, as I see it, has another kind of going back into life. If somebody is talking about the past, I am concerned that what they have to say can be heard by others, so that they become aware of these things that happened in the past of this country. . . or are happening now. . . that they become more aware, for instance, of British Columbia and British Columbia life, which we really are very unaware of. I find the students know almost nothing about it, and then, suddenly, they realize that the tape recorder has made it possible to increase this awareness by having people talk, and by listening to them and sharing in their experiences and their lives . . . and you get this sense of the identity of the place.

MR. TRUAX: The implication of the past for us is the design of the future – design of the soundscape to prevent it from being totally chaotic. When you say you're concerned with the future, you find yourself facing the problem of design. Every sound is in fact designed at some level, speech is designed to convey meaning in certain ways, it has certain rules and procedures that do that. Why can't we design the entire sound environment! In fact, if we don't, speech may become totally impossible anyway.

MR. BROOMFIELD: It may sound a bit trite, but the design of the soundscape begins at home! If you live in a place where a tape recorder and a radio and a television are allowed to play at once, it's the beginning of noise.

MR. ORCHARD: Young people today use sound as a wall, a stone wall between you and them.

MR. BROOMFIELD: Our living spaces have become so small, and our sense of private property is so great, that when we feel an enmity towards someone, we won't take action on their physical space, but we'll

certainly turn our amplifier up in order to violate their aural space, and the number of wars that go on between people acoustically is outrageous. The first thing we have to do to design the soundscape is to be quiet and listen to ourselves, because we're making a tremendous amount of noise.

MR. ORCHARD: Environmental sound design was used in the last war as sound camouflage. The crossing of the Rhine, for instance, was effected in one place by the fact it was a foggy night and they had big loudspeakers making the sound of guns, tanks and other vehicles mobilizing on the bank, when the real thing was quietly taking place somewhere else altogether.

MR. TRUAX: It's background now – the Muzak, the ventilators, the traffic, the refrigerators. Those war sounds were foreground – now we're designing the fog, not the loudspeakers!

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MR. BROOMFIELD: I see a dialectic going on between the voice and the soundscape. There's a kind of history that transcends language and transcends words and is realized best in hearing the way a voice relates to its ambience. There's a history of man in the field, in the life-world, that comes across just in terms of the way his tone relates to the tones around him. *Now* the human voice is smothered by machinery and that's a kind of history that most people wouldn't think to talk about linguistically.

MR. ORCHARD: You say "now", because we're sitting out here on the lawn beside Simon Fraser University, but the traffic isn't far off. And there's also a noise, a keynote, that comes off the building, a general hum; and so we're by no means in silence here, and we relate to that with our voices. But in general we have psychologically to shut our ears, which is what people, of course, are doing all the time.

MR. BROOMFIELD: What's even worse is that there seems to be a deadening of the voice that goes along with the livening of the machine soundscape. The voice starts to take on the characteristics of the machine, rather than have the fluency it would have in a natural environment where the sounds are more varied. I think that people learn how to speak, not only by listening to other people's voices, but by listening to the natural sounds around them. If you listen to a Squamish Indian speak, you'll hear a lot more wind and water in his voice than you will in our voices. We've been living with typewriters and machines like that, so we talk in long lines.

MR. ORCHARD: That's very interesting, and very true, and very relevant to this aural history approach, looking at it from my side, because obviously we don't usually take great account of the place where we are recording or the speaker's background. I mean, you just are there and you're just interested in what they have to say. Yet the whole tone of voice is very important as meaning; and if, for instance, there was a lot of mechanical noise, our voices would take on a different colour, than if we were sitting in the woods somewhere.

MR. BROOMFIELD: We have to raise our voices above the machines, we have to fit ourselves into the parts of the frequency spectrum which the machine leaves out, just so we can be heard!

MR. TRUAX: The basic point we're making is that people are not aware of how sound affects them, all the time, every day, not only the sound they focus on, such as speech sounds that you normally bring out of the ambience into the foreground of perception. The general rise of the ambient noise level of society in the last fifty years or so not only reflects the technological advance, but also is the same kind of evolution that our consciousness is going through. . .the paradox of constant bombardment with more and more stimuli, and the necessity of shutting out most of those stimuli that are not necessary for existence. So, we see this, or rather we hear this as a problem of feedback, you might say: the more one is shutting out, the less aware one can be of the sounds of the environment, because one is less disposed to listen to them. Therefore, the environment can become chaotic without your getting up and saying, "Stop! I can't tolerate this any

more!" We feel this kind of deadening, and perhaps you might link this to the loss of oral tradition in our kind of society, if only because it's just harder to hear people speak. And, as Howard suggested, what we call the "flat line" or "long line" of drones and hums from mechanical and electrical apparatus seems to be reflected in North American speech patterns.

MR. BROOMFIELD: I'm not sure when written history began, but it seems that history really is an oral thing, not a written thing, that once history starts being written it starts getting overly concerned with facts and not concerned with human history. . . but people nowadays who are carrying on the oral tradition are the people who are most disenfranchised from society. If you want to get a fast oral history of Vancouver, the best place to go is down to where the winos and the drunks hang out, because they always have the stories and they may not be true stories, but they're passionate stories, and they're stories that they've been building for years and years and years, because they have no fact to hold on to . . . they have to invent history.

MR. ORCHARD: It's the myth, really, rather than the history; and the myth, of course, is a very important part of the background of any area, any country, any town. We often ignore it, but possibly we will become more aware of it now because we have this sound recording apparatus.

MR. TRUAX (to Mr. Orchard): Talking about the past, and the way that you have used sounds for the past, and the way we are using sounds now, take *The Vancouver Soundscape* for example . . . what is your reaction to our use of sounds in terms of history? In fact, because the tape recorder is recording what is in the present, would you be critical of us as being too present-oriented because of our emphasis on sounds, or do you get a sense of history from what we've done so far?

MR. ORCHARD: I think very much you're documenting history, because from this point of view, as soon as you document anything it becomes history, it's fixed in time as of that particular moment; and even if the moment was a mere five minutes ago, it's still history, but not very long from now it is going to be fifty years from now, and that sound which was Vancouver at that time becomes a historical document. I'm also aware that you're tremendously interested in a sound as it was described by someone, a sound that can no longer be heard. Someone has described it in writing, and often in so doing they reveal their attitude toward the sound.

MR. TRUAX: These are what we call "earwitness accounts"; by analogy to eyewitness, an earwitness is someone who reports about what he or she has heard, what they remember about sound or sound experiences they have had. We've gathered these from literary sources; for instance, in *The Vancouver Soundscape,* the first ones are from the journals of Vancouver and Menzies, the original voyages. Then we come right up to people who are alive today, reminiscing about what it was like in the twenties, the thirties and so on. *The Vancouver Soundscape* is already an historical document, it was recorded roughly a year ago now, and some of the sound, for instance the Point Atkinson lighthouse diaphone, in a few more months will not be heard likely again, it's already a disappearing sound; the 9 o'clock gun too at this moment is not sounding. All the sounds within the next few years will probably change, an evolution will go on. Because you're recording and making this instantaneous image of a sound, you put it on tape and you make it an object; the object survives, therefore the sound survives in some sense. Now, have you noticed though, we also have this ability to take the sound out of time and out of context and isolate it, what we call a "sound object", and then we can transform that object into something unrelated, at least in the aural impression, to what we had before. We call this an "imaginary soundscape", where we're using sounds and making something derived from a reality, but in fact it is creating a new reality.

MR. ORCHARD: Well that's getting into another space altogether; it's becoming very creative and much

more than mere documentation. One is reaching out into the manipulation of sound for aesthetic reasons, partly for the sake of the sound itself. . . the quality that it has. In my field, putting together this sort of radio documentary, one that includes voices *and* sounds. Perhaps you've recorded a particularly beautiful voice, just as you might pick up a particularly beautiful sound, and then you edit it in such a way that its natural rhythm is enhanced, or you splice in other voices or cross fade them and all that becomes a creative process in which you're using sound partly for its own sake. For instance, once I recorded the sound of the Skeena River rushing through the Kitselas Canyon, and during production I added the voice of an Indian giving the right pronunciation of Kitselas, which is "*Git* – se – *laaass*"; and the voice had been put on echo and mixed with a few raven cries, also from the area – and you got a sound that was weird and ghostly. And I used this to introduce a programme that was about the canyon, and set the mood, you see.

MR. BROOMFIELD: Something that you just did, I wonder if many aural historians are getting into and that's working with the voices that you've recorded and heard, to make those voices your own, to become an embodiment of the history as well as a collector of the tapes, to be able to feel and to speak with the voices of the people who've spoken. Somehow that seems as important as writing it down. If just a few people learn to speak with the voice of the past . . . .

MR. ORCHARD: As an aural historian I'm not much concerned with transcribing. The academic approach to this, taking its cue from Columbia University apparently, where it started, is to get the tape transcribed and then it can be picked off the shelf, and read at leisure by people who haven't got any ears. There's nothing wrong in that except it's a very incomplete process. When you're writing something you're careful to arrange it so that its full meaning is apparent when someone else reads it. But if you transcribe something that somebody has spoken, you're only getting a relatively small portion of the meaning, because a great deal of this meaning is in the inflection of the voice, in the rhythm of the voice, in the pauses, the volume, the emphasis.

MR. BROOMFIELD: The way that would get into writing is a poet's job, not something a secretary or someone untrained in language can do. The person who's operating in the field has the opportunity to become a germ-cell of history: they can carry the history in their own voice with them, to make history a part of now.

MR. ORCHARD: Anyone who's describing an event is re-living it, and that re-living is not only being communicated to the person who's listening, but is being fixed on the tape at that moment, so that every time the tape is played there's a kind of bringing of the past into the present in the voice itself.

MR. TRUAX: We want to take the person into the original environment, not bring the original environment into his own. It is much more effective to go into the past as directly and completely as possible, to recreate the soundscape in which those sounds occurred.

MR. ORCHARD: Well this is true. Somebody merely describing something is a limited process. You don't get the sounds that they are describing.

MR. TRUAX: But there you must be careful. You must recreate the sound in the way people remember it, not in the way the tape recorder would have picked it up at the time. People remember things in a way that is, in fact, not the way they actually occurred. They simplify things: first of all the background goes out, all the inessential things are omitted. Long-term memory tends to "idealize" and isolate those sounds, so when we put sounds together, often we are deliberately appealing to the way people will have remembered these sounds, or perhaps just the opposite, for a sort of "shock effect". But our whole basis, at least from my point of view, is that the soundscape is essentially the interface between the real environment and the inner

environment of how people remember, imagine, and make fantasy about sound, the perceptual and cognitive process, so even when we go into the past, which past are we going into, the tape recorder past, or the imagined-remembered past? We must understand how people understand sounds in the first place, and then how they remember them, how they recreate them. This is really the only true past there is: what resides in the mind.

MR. ORCHARD: For each person then, there's a different past. For Captain Vancouver sailing up the Gulf of Georgia, it was one past; for his first-mate it was another.

MR. TRUAX: And for the Indians it was completely different, because those were two different worlds intersecting.

MR. ORCHARD: And just as we're sitting here recording sounds . . . when we listen to this tape, we will hear those sounds in quite a different way from how we hear them now. They're caught on the tape in a very mechanical way, very objective, as opposed to the human way. We ourselves focus psychologically on one sound or another.

MR. TRUAX: And the microphone itself, its whole directional characteristic has already distorted what actually was perceived. If it's a cardioid or a highly directed mike, then it only picks up in a certain direction, and the rest of the context is lost.

MR. ORCHARD: And the camera does exactly the same thing.

MR. TRUAX: So it's more important, to me anyway, not only to understand how the tape recorder picks up sound, but how the mind understands sounds in the first place.

MR. ORCHARD: And then the tape recorder merely becomes an aid to that.