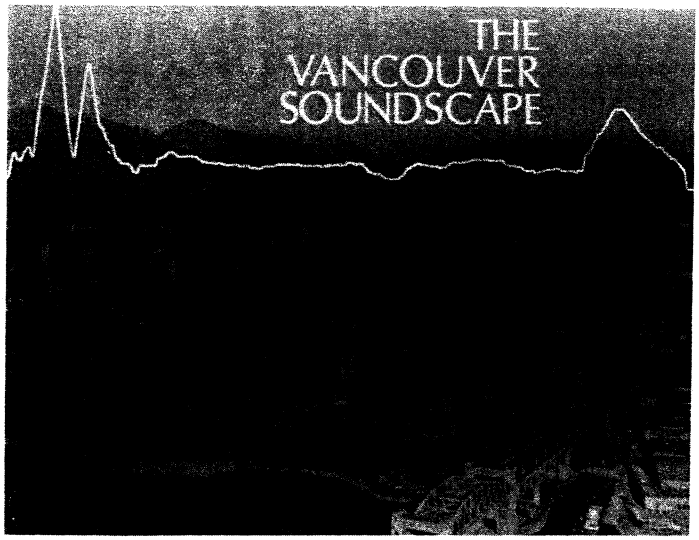

REVIEW

by Max Wyman

> "Our broadest and most ambitious aim, I suppose, is to redesign the soundscape of the world. Our modest aim is to show individuals how to listen on a daily basis . . . we want to alert people to the fact that if we don't do something about this soon, then we – or our children – are going to go deaf."

The speaker is Barry Truax, member of the staff at Simon Fraser University's World Soundscape Project – and he made the statement during a public presentation of a "soundscape evening" at the University late last year.

The World Soundscape Project was established in 1972. It is the baby of composer R. Murray Schafer, who recently quit his post as communications professor at SFU – and he set it up "to bring together research on the scientific, sociological and aesthetic aspects of the acoustic environment."

Schafer has become internationally known in recent years as one of the most vociferous of campaigners for new "acoustic design" and for controls over society's increasingly oppressive sound pollution.

One of the major problems facing him in his attempts to clean up our sonic environment has been the problem of actual definition. What *is* sound pollution? How do we describe the boundaries of our "acoustic ecology"? The problems are of such recent origin that the society has hardly had time to create definitions. So a major aim of the World Soundscape Project has been – and remains – the familiarization of the public with the concept of noise and noise control: before they can provide solutions or progressions, after all, they must first demonstrate that a problem exists.

They have gone about this task in a number of imaginative ways, principally by means of issuing what they term "documents". The first of these was a primer on noise pollution by Schafer: *The Book of Noise*, in many ways a sequel to earlier books by Schafer concerned with new methods of music teaching and music appreciation techniques.

Next came a ninety minute quadraphonic tape composition titled *Okeanos*, in which "a genealogy of images of the sea attempts to bring a sense of ocean to the listener."

This was followed by *The Music of the Environment,* a UNESCO-sponsored publication by Schafer characterizing the acoustic environment as a "macrocultural composition" and laying down the ground-rules for the actual World Soundscape Project: "an inter-discipline in which musicians, acousticians, psychologists, sociologists and others would study the world soundscape together in order to make intelligent recommendations for its improvement. This study would consist of documenting important features, of noting differences, parallels and trends, of collecting sounds threatened with extinction, of studying new sounds before they are released into the environment, of studying the rich symbolism sounds have for man, and of studying human behaviour patterns in different sound environments, in order to use these insights in planning future environments for man."

The fourth document issued by the Project was a *Survey of Community Noise By-Laws in Canada,* as of 1972, together with suggestions for their improvement.

And this was followed last fall by the appearance of their most important document to date – *The Vancouver Soundscape.* It comes in the form of a handsomely produced book and album of two long-playing recordings – and what it does and says is of enormous significance and future importance not only for Vancouver and its immediate area but for all cities. One could suggest, in fact, that the appearance of this "document" confirmed the World Soundscape Project in a position potentially as significant for the future of mankind as that of any study yet undertaken of any other form of pollution that besets us.

The Vancouver Soundscape is a distillation of much that the project workers have discovered and collected under the terms outlined by Schafer in *The Music of the Environment* and it is planned as the first of several similar studies of cities around the world. Major funding for the project has recently been guaranteed for a further lengthy period, and it is likely that the staff will now repeat its Vancouver study in another part of the globe, possibly Europe.

What the researchers undertook in Vancouver was nothing less than a scientific dissection of the sounds we live in – they spent months interviewing, digging through archives and travelling the city with complex recording equipment, and what they have produced is a graphic, compelling and ultimately sobering aural portrait of a city in danger of deafening itself.

Not all sound is bad; the message Schafer and his associates are trying to bring across is that we must be selective about the noise we hear.

They recognize, too, that much of the sound of Vancouver's history has gone for good, and will remain unrecordable for ever – so they precede their detailed examination of the current and past development of Vancouver's soundscape with what they term "ear-witness accounts" from persons who remember the sounds that have gone.

There are quotes from the journals of Captain George Vancouver, and of Emily Carr ("The silence of our Western forests was so profound that our ears could scarcely comprehend it. If you spoke your voice came back to you as your face is thrown back to you in a mirror."); from Pauline Johnson; from Alan Morley ("Graham Co.'s Pioneer Mill was complete with two centre-discharge waterwheels of 50 horsepower and the 22-inch planing mill. The infant cream of the mill's puny (by later standards) head saws was the birth-cry of the city."); from newspapers of the day; from by-laws ("It shall be unlawful for any minor . . . to make any undue noise by shouting or yelling"); and from personal reminiscence ("One of the real landmarks in

Vancouver was an old woman who would yell "Provennce"! She sold the Province newspaper under Birk's clock. She had a voice like a foghorn and had a long, frayed, black coat with a man's hat and fingerless gloves.").

But the reminiscence is only a prelude: soon we are into complaints of the present day – Roland Small's precise documentation, for example, of a "low humming rumble" that can be heard in many parts of south Vancouver: "This sound," he says, "is a subtle and lethal torture, and the city of Vancouver should not allow it to continue."

And then, after a brief historical sketch, the book goes into detail. It defines the early "keynote" sounds of the city, and outlines how they have changed over the years: water and forest sounds to steam sounds, then the sounds of vehicular traffic and most recently to the newest sounds – electrical equipment, air conditioning and piped-in music. And it makes the point that "some local tone colours are being lost as the city trades in its geography for international technology."

Sound signals – train and ship whistles, foghorns, police and civil defence sirens – are examined minutely, and here, as throughout the book and recording, there is an abundance of fascinating, quotable material that springs not only from the material but from the researchers' obvious fascination and love for the subject:

> "In the immediate sense, train whistles are purely functional devices for warning and signalling purposes. Taken however as elements of the acoustic environment, as pure sound, they can contain other kinds of information: on one level they reveal the personality of the engineer, and on another, that of the culture as a whole. Why are European train whistles so markedly different from those in North America? In Europe whistles are bright and piping. In Canada they are deep and haunting. Is it the long haul from East to West across thousands of miles of lonely and spectacular landscape that makes the E flat minor Canadian whistle seem so appropriate?"

In a similar manner, the city's Soundmarks – the famous Nine O'Clock Gun at Brockton Point in Stanley Park, the O Canada horn on the B.C. Hydro building, the bells of Holy Rosary cathedral – are examined and commented on (the horn, say the researchers, is "an unsatisfactory soundmark and its perpetuation can only be justified as a gross expression of national sentiment").

And this is followed by a documentation of the "Schizophonia" (easy enough to comprehend, given the topic) of the aural community – telephone-bell variations throughout the region, and a breakdown of sound coverage offered by a variety of radio stations.

There is lengthy – and, ultimately, outraged – examination of Vancouver's "seaplane menace": "From our seaplane counts and time logs we can now make an educated guess as to when the drone of aircraft noise over Stanley Park will be total and uninterrupted if the present trend continues: 1981."

What the researchers term "The bad breath of buildings" also comes under heavy attack ("fans and exhaust systems disgorge staggering amounts of noise into the streets and onto the sidewalks around . . . buildings") as, of course, do "wired background music systems, to which we give the bovine name of Moozak." "Moozak reduces music to ground," says the book. "It is a deliberate concession to

lo-fi-ism. It multiplies sounds. It reduces a sacred art to a slobber. Moozak is music that is not to be listened to. By creating a fuss about sounds we snap them back into focus as figures. The way to defeat Moozak is, therefore, quite simple: listen to it."

The book reproduces the results of a brief survey in which young Vancouverites were asked to write down the most beautiful and the most ugly sounds in their lives. Topping the list of the most beautiful, in this order of precedence, were: waves, birdsong, crackling of fire, tinkling of bells or chimes, waterfalls, wind, rain and children laughing. Most ugly: heavy traffic, honking and tires skidding, power saws, wail of sirens, gunfire, dentist's drill, screams of humans and animals in pain, belching and construction noise.

"We are faced today with an overpopulation of sounds," say the researchers. "Critical decisions are needed to determine those we will want to keep and those we need to eliminate." So the last part of the book is an attempt to engage the reader in active participation in cleaning up and improving the sound environment.

And while the impact of the book has been, to be sure, a sobering one, the ultimate message is one of hope – as long as we are prepared to do something about it ourselves. This last section of the book is, in this sense, the most important. It outlines techniques of listening, of documentation of sound events, and it makes numerous suggestions for improvements in acoustic design that can be achieved by anyone sufficiently concerned to raise a voice: "We must return to the Vancouver soundscape the flavour of its original elements – cataracts, swift flowing waters and ocean waves, the inimitable sound of wind in evergreen trees, and the natural resonances of wood, shells and stone. That will be our task."

The recordings that accompany the book are intended to present a sonic picture of Vancouver as it stands now – a sweeping sound-survey of the noise of the city: ocean sounds, the harbour and its atmosphere, bells, industry, entertainment, horns and whistles, soundmarks of the city. And these are supplemented by an illustrated talk by Murray Schafer on acoustic design in Vancouver, and a discussion between the soundscapers on how the project was completed.

The World Soundscape Project people are not rabid abolitionists. Rather, it is their real affection for a balanced sonic environment that presses them to plead so strongly for a clean-up of the sound pollution that currently plagues us.

Shortly after the appearance of the Vancouver Soundscape an evening was held at Simon Fraser University at which 10 tape-events of various kinds were presented. These ranged from the sounds of a day passing beside the pond at Westminster Abbey near Mission and the condensed sound of two hours of early-morning birdsong to the sound of bells and feet and water and the sound of people in contest – and all had been produced as part of the Soundscape project. They were also broadcast by the CBC over a two week period – and all help focus public attention on the problem.

What can the public do? At the soundscape evening, a number of possibilities were suggested.

Get in touch with citizen environment protection agencies. Write letters to high places. Get a copy of your local noise by-laws and quote it, chapter and verse, every time you call your local police to complain about noise disturbances. Tell people what the dangers are.

Students, meanwhile, might like to get involved in such projects as measuring the sound of the environment, particularly sounds that may soon disappear; designing sound-walks (the booklet outlines one but they can be undertaken anywhere); collecting hearing-loss information; researching building

sound-design; in short, documenting more details of the world soundscape in order to provide fuel for change.

"And for every sound you find that you dislike," said project member Bruce Davis at the soundscape evening, "listen for one you like."