
Report: Soundscape Vancouver May 6 - June 8, 1996 Vancouver, BC, Canada

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Vancouver is known as the "home" of acoustic ecology, due principally to the pioneering work of the World Soundscape Project in the 1970's. However what has happened since then in the field in acoustic ecology on the west coast?

The Soundscape Vancouver '96 symposium brought us up to date and has paved the way for the future of Vancouver as a leading voice in acoustic-ecology in many ways. The event consisted of a month-long residency, a concert and a symposium.

Residency, May 6- June 5 Simon Fraser University

In the early 1970's, the World Soundscape Project, under the direction of R. Murray Schafer, launched a research project on the soundscape of Vancouver including the publication of a book and a double LP recording.

In the early 1990's, the School of Communication of Simon Fraser University, with the guidance of Barry Truax, undertook a "re-visitation" of the Vancouver soundscape, including a research project to re-record the acoustic environment of Vancouver and compare changes in the soundscape over the years.

In 1996, the Soundscape Vancouver '96 project, under the direction of Hildegard Westerkamp, brought together two Canadian composers (Darren Copeland & Claude Schryer) and two German composer/sound artists (Sabine Breitsameter & Hans U. Werner) for a month long residency at SFU to create electroacoustic compositions about Vancouver and to participate in a Symposium about acoustic ecology.

Each composer developed a c.15 minute composition using materials from the extensive environmental sound archive at the School of Communications at SFU as well as our own recordings to create personal sound-portraits of Vancouver (see the report from the Symposium for more details). We also had access to an 8 track computer controlled diffusion system developed by Barry Truax at SFU (in collaboration with software designer Chris Rolfe) which allowed us to spatialise our 8 track compositions over 8 separate loudspeakers.

Soundscape Vancouver '96 was organized by the School of Communication at SFU and the Goethe-Institut Vancouver (Dr. Werner Wolf, Director) in collaboration with members of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), the Vancouver New Music Festival and CBC Radio.

Music of the City Soundscape Vancouver '96 Concert, June 7

This concert was part of the first Vancouver International New Music festival organized by the Vancouver New Music Society (VNMS) (Owen Underhill, artistic director), in collaboration with CBC Radio.

The concert was hosted by Hildegard Westerkamp, coordinator of Vancouver Soundscape '96

and Janet Danielson, associate artistic director of the VNMS. There were c.200 audience members.

The program included:

"Entry into the Harbour" (1973) by a collective from the World Soundscape Project (an excerpt from the beginning of the original Vancouver Soundscape LP)

"Listening in place of seeing" (1996) by Darren Copeland (the first of two excerpts from a larger work on the theme of the perceptions of the blind)

"The Hidden Tune" (1996) by Sabine Breitsameter (a poetic exploration of the "melody" of Vancouver and how Vancouver might have sounded some 2000 years ago)

"Vancouver Soundscape Revisited" (1996) by Claude Schryer (a set of nine miniatures incorporating a large array of old and new soundscapes)

"Recharting the Senses" (1996) by Darren Copeland (the second excerpt from a larger work)

An excerpt from "Fog" (1990) by Barry Truax (a four track tape piece composed using Truax's granular synthesis system)

"Kits Beach Soundwalk" (1989) by Hildegard Westerkamp (a "classic" electroacoustic soundscape composition performed by Hildi herself)

"Horns and Sirens" (1973) by a collective from the World Soundscape Project (the collage of various horns and sirens from the Vancouver Soundscape LP)

"Vanscape Motion" (1996) by Hans U. Werner (a slow moving impressionistic exploration of the city)

The concert space, an ideal setting for the presentation of electroacoustic soundscape compositions, was very exciting as soundscapes from the 1970's met soundscapes from the 1990's in virtual space.

This concert will be broadcast on CBC stereo's "Two New Hours" and in Berlin this fall. It will be released on a double CD set including four new compositions and the original Vancouver Soundscape LP in collaboration with SFU and the Goethe-Institut Vancouver.

Symposium, June 8 Goethe Institut

Participants: Claude Schryer, composer (Montreal); Barry Truax, composer (Vancouver); Joelle Ciona, performance artist (Montreal); Sabine Breitsameter, sound artist (Berlin); Brent Calkin, sound engineer (Vancouver), Petra, staff member of Goethe-Institut Vancouver; Tanya Petermen, choreographer & administrator (Vancouver); Jacky Loucks, KBPS-FM Portland; Bob MacNevin, sound designer (Vancouver); Gary Ferrington, educator, (Eugene, Oregon, USA); Glenda, medical scientist (South Africa); Bonnie Schweiter, artist (Vancouver); Dr. Werner Wolf, Goethe-Institut (Vancouver); Dave, software developer (Vancouver); Jean Routhier, composer (Montreal); Nathan Aswell, musician (Vancouver); Hans U Werner, sound artist (Germany); Hildegard Westerkamp, composer (Vancouver).

Dr. Werner Wolf, director of the Goethe-Institut thanked the composers and School of Communication at SFU, the technicians, Vancouver New Music Society and Hildegard Westerkamp.

Hildi introduced Barry Truax and mentioned the importance of his "Handbook for Acoustic Ecology" as an important interface with the scientific community and how Truax successfully walks the line between art, academia and science.

Barry Truax presentation:

Barry Truax talked about soundscape composition as a cutting edge in contemporary art and that acoustic design could be applied to the environment at large. "Schafer started us thinking about this and it goes on".

He spoke of his involvement in the Vancouver Urban Noise Task Force and questioned the role of the artist in the acoustic ecology movement. He also questioned what were the guideposts in the field of acoustic ecology.

He described soundscapes as systems of communication and elaborated on the differences between the electroacoustic and the soundscape approach in composition. He then discussed the following compositional models:

1. Soundwalk (make your own composition)
2. Found sound document (framed)
3. Compressed time span (24 hour)
4. Simulated soundscape (as in "Entry to the Harbour" from WSP).

He also spoke about the differences between acousmatic and soundscape composition: a sound object is "context free" whereas a sound event is "context imbedded", a sound object calls for "reduced listening" while a sound event calls upon "expanded awareness", a sound object is "musically recontextualised" while a sound event is "environmentally recontextualized", a sound object is created on a fixed "support medium" while a sound event requires "listener's participation".

To conclude, he played excerpts from his composition "Dominion", end of prairie section into BC (stretched train, horn, wind sounds) and from his composition "Basilica".

Sabine Breitsameter presentation:

Sabine spoke of her sonic experiences as a child living in a house near railway tracks and her memories of distant train sounds. She was attracted to the field of Horspiel and the incorporation of everyday sounds into sound art and music.

"What do I want from sound?" As a child I was attracted by special acoustic places. Like a distant concert. I found the soundscape community. Discovered specific acoustic identities in my travels. By listening, the desire to compose grew."

She spoke of how sounds can "allow one to experience time and compress time or create a static experience of time". She spoke of her memories of Vancouver in 1993, Stanley Park (distant), Chinatown (lively), Hastings (violent). Her general impression of the city was that it is a slow paced city quite different from fast paced Berlin (narrow streets). "Vancouver is a quiet city and is not appropriate for it to be too busy."

To compose her piece, she selected sounds intuitively from given descriptions and lists and then explored how to connect with them.

She normally does not function as a technical engineer in Germany, but here did her own engineering along with Susan Frykberg.

Darren Copeland presentation:

Darren mentioned his satisfaction and honour in participating in this residency. Thanks to Bob MacNevin, who recorded the materials. "It was almost like we all wrote string quartets because we were all working from the same materials. A very unique experience".

The two pieces he presented were excerpts from a larger piece entitled "Life Unseen", a soundscape documentary based on the experience of blind people. His work is not concerned with acoustic ecology per se, but rather on shifting attention to senses other than the dominant visual sense. As one of the persons interviewed for the work said, "Blind people hear things we miss. They pick up on things we convey in our voices."

As a composer, Darren actually feels that he is at a creative standstill. He is undergoing difficulty in determining what images and meanings are communicated in a work drawing entirely from environmental sound.

He likes Hans Werner's term "klanguage", because it suggests the possibility of a lexicon for sound meanings and imagery. In the case of the concert, how did the Vancouver audience hear their own city? What experiences did they imagine, how would they listen to the concert differently than an audience not familiar with the sounds of Vancouver?

He noted he has written an essay that is critical of musical attitudes and the visual bias on our understanding of environmental sound and is concerned about the absence of the blind community in dialogue concerning acoustic ecology, mentioning the importance of engaging their participation in acoustic ecology.

Nathan Aswell soundwalk and Kathy Kennedy performance:

Nathan expressed his pleasure at leading a soundwalk for such a large number of participants. He invited the group to discover and create the soundwalk collectively. Two walks took place around the Goethe Institute area.

Montreal based sound artist Kathy Kennedy presented a site-specific performance at the end of the first and at the beginning of the second soundwalk. A group of seven Vancouver based musicians/sound artists, spread out in the brush along a park pathway, performed with 1 watt radios and various home-made instruments, vocal effects, percussion, etc. The effect was enchanting as various electronic and acoustic echoes could be heard but not seen along the pathway.

Claude Schryer presentation:

"It was a pleasure and a privilege for me to be a part of the Vancouver Soundscape '96 residency. It was a rare and enriching experience to be surrounded by generous and inspired colleagues who share a common vision of the importance of acoustic-ecology in our lives and healthy integration of electroacoustic technology in our daily lives."

I talked about my experience in writing "Vancouver Soundscape Revisited" including studying

the sounds for an extended period before assembling the piece in only a few days.

I discussed issues of appropriation and ownership in soundscape composition which I am beginning to question and put into perspective. I also spoke about how I am beginning to converge my electroacoustic, social, spiritual and soundscapes interest into my artistic practice. I played an excerpt from my 1996 radio piece "El medio ambiente acustico de Mexico" and from my 1996 co-composition with Helene Prevost called "Autour d'une musique portuaire".

I also showed a 3 minute television news item by SRC Television (in French) about our residency in Vancouver. I spoke of my composition method which was to select sequences from the World Soundscape Project collection, edit and catalogue them by spectrum, category, function, pitch and context and experiment with various combinations and modifications of the material until an interesting "sonic alchemy's" were found...

Hans U. Werner presentation:

Hans echoed many things already said. He spoke of various forms of motions, trains, etc. in his piece and thanked Bob MacNevin for recording materials.

During his residency Hans explored the city and fine tuned his perception of the city which he characterized as an "Air ballet with too many planes".

"My studio was the city, the city was the studio. Some sounds were missing from the collection, such as niches or plazas where people "live" on the street - not homeless, but in a venetian sense."

He asked experts about their audiovision of the city and explored the accelerating quality, the air condition spreading out, the construction of niches and observed that the louder it gets the more there was a sensitivity to silence, etc.

"Mind mapping was one of my approaches to my piece". He referred to wearing different hats and integrating them in his work.

He talked about his work at the WDR and played a work by Bil Fontana with his satellite bridge in 1987 which was a strong inspiration but that was not the piece. A German author and our studio transferred a different idea to a German town; with a traditional football match with a neighbouring city. Below the game stadium was coal mining going on. Both values, soccer and coal, lost their importance at that time - a moment of identity.

The Vancouver Soundscape '96 symposium was intimate and thought provoking. At the end of the event the group expressed a desire to meet again soon...