

Meaningful Listening through Soundwalks

Andra McCartney

Associate Professor, Communication Studies Concordia University

andra.mccartney@concordia.ca

Abstract

Soundscape studies consider the acoustic environment as it is created, shaped and heard by those who move through and inhabit the environment. This is a multidisciplinary, qualitative approach that considers the sounds heard as well as the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. A soundwalk is an exploration of a location through walking, in which listening becomes the primary source of information. Soundwalks are used for exploratory and research purposes, they can be recorded, and can also be guided. Soundwalks provide a way for people to think through the cultural, political, sonic and social meanings of everyday sounds.

The Soundwalking Interactions research project in the Communication Studies department at Concordia University considers approaches to soundwalks and interactive soundscape installations that challenge audiences to approach such walks and installations actively, using interpretive and inventive listening practices. Such practices can lead to heightened opportunities for reflexive development of creativity in artists and audiences. The presentation at the Electroacoustic Music Studies Network meeting in Stockholm discusses recent soundwalks and soundwalk art projects undertaken by the research group, drawing out themes about how audiences interact, listen, and make meaning in each context.

Introduction

I want to begin by thanking Bill Brunson and the conference program committee for the opportunity to speak to you here.

Part of my aim in today's talk is to discuss the practice of soundwalking and to invite you to a public walk that will be held immediately following the end of my talk. This practice of soundwalking is something that has been part of my daily life for decades, as an approach to listening and as a source of inspiration for creative work. A soundwalk is an exploration of a location through walking, in which listening becomes the primary mode of attention. Soundwalks are used for exploratory and research purposes, they can be recorded, and can also be guided. In the Soundwalking Interactions project we pay particular attention to the framing of each soundwalk, discussing listening strategies before each walk and then leading a discussion after the walk which influences the creation of multimedia work that reflects on the soundwalk listening experience. These multimedia works are then placed online with blog entries, which discuss the issues that arise in each walk. This multilayered dialogic method focuses particular attention on meaningful conversations, starting with the people who

participate in each emplaced walk, then reaching out to a larger online audience. Soundwalks followed by conversations about the walks provide a way for people to think through the cultural, musical, political, sonic and social meanings of everyday sounds in particular places. Listening in these soundwalks can be active, critical, dynamic and attendant to the requirements of the moment, similar to the listening of improvising musicians. The work of the soundwalk leader is crucial in designing structures for activities, suggesting listening strategies, and leading discussions; participants are encouraged to engage actively and creatively with the soundwalk, to respond to sound immediately in the space, then to bring listening insights to discussions.

The most developed soundwalk interactions in the project are with other musicians and artists. In April 2011, I performed with a Malaysian video artist, Kok Siew Wai, improvising sound to video and creating short performance pieces integrating sound, poetry and video, based on walks together in Montreal. In May 2011, Professor Don Sinclair of York University in Toronto created a MAX/MSP/Jitter system that tracked gestural movement in a prescribed space. This system was used by us with a choreographer and four dancers to translate a group soundwalk experience into a dance performance. In May 2012, composer-violinist Malcolm Goldstein was invited to create a work in which three musicians and three sound recordists listened intensively to the sounds of an urban park during an afternoon, and then made a one-hour improvisatory performance in the park, integrating the instrumental music with raw and processed sound recordings and the sound environment of the park itself.

The mundane sounds of everyday life can be experienced as static, a distraction, a noise that interferes with thought and energy; or conversely, these sounds that we might dismiss as unmusical and un-interesting, and therefore unimportant, could be the source of new musical insights as well as knowledge about the sounding environment. Soundwalks and other everyday listening practices provide access to these sources of insight and meaning.

Listening with James Tenney

To think through this practice of making meaning from everyday sonic experience, and to connect it explicitly to electroacoustic music, I would like to frame my discussion by reading a long quote by composer and theorist James Tenney. He describes his listening experience driving the Holland Tunnel from New York City to New Jersey, while working at the Bell Labs in the early 1960s, where he created several ground-breaking stochastic computer music pieces. This listening experience inspired his approach to computer music and his writing about musical analysis through listening, later published in the book *Meta + Hodos*, the first edition of which was written shortly after the Bell Labs experience. As with soundwalking, what Tenney describes is an everyday listening experience with environmental sounds.

“For several months I had been driving to New York City in the evening, returning to the Labs the next morning by way of the heavily traveled Route 22 and the Holland Tunnel. This circuit was made as often as three times every week, and the drive was always an exhausting, nerve-racking experience, fast furious... The sounds of the traffic – especially in the tunnel – were usually so loud and continuous that, for example, it was impossible to maintain a conversation with a companion... One day I found myself listening to these sounds, instead of trying to ignore them as usual... the sounds of the traffic became so interesting that the trip was no longer a thing to be dreaded and gotten through as quickly as possible. From then on, I actually looked forward to it as a source of new perceptual insights. Gradually, I learned to hear these sounds more acutely, to follow the evolution of single elements within the total sonorous

‘mass’, to feel, kinesthetically, the characteristic rhythmic articulations of the various elements in combination, etc. Then I began to try to analyze the sounds, aurally, to estimate what their physical properties might be – drawing upon what I already knew of acoustics and the correlation of the physical and the subjective attributes of sound.

From this image, then, of traffic noises – and especially those heard in the tunnel, where the over-all sonority is richer, denser, and the changes are mostly very gradual – I began to conceive a musical composition that not only used sound elements similar to these, but manifested similarly gradual changes in sonority. I thought also of the sound of the ocean surf – in many ways like the traffic sounds – and some of the qualities of this did ultimately manifest themselves in the Noise Study. I did not want the quasi-periodic nature of the seasounds in the piece however, and this was carefully avoided in the composition process. Instead, I wanted the aperiodic, ‘asymmetrical’ kind of rhythmic flow that was characteristic of the traffic sounds.” (Tenney as quoted in Polansky, 1984: 154-155)

There are several aspects of this listening experience that link it with my practice of soundwalking. What Tenney describes is a repeated daily journey, a sequence of movements through a place made familiar through repetition. It is listening in motion, over and over again, bringing attention to the familiar and making the familiar uncanny in order to understand it better. As with soundwalk projects, Tenney’s listening experience begins with a mundane, repeated activity and changes that activity, and his perception of it, through the action of listening.

Politics and pleasures of embodied listening

Repeated soundwalks have a similar purpose for me as Tenney’s repeated listening while travelling. Places reveal different aspects of their sonic life through time: if soundwalks are repeated daily, weekly, day and night, through seasons, over years perhaps, and with attention, much becomes apparent that evades the initial experience or recording. The soundwalk researcher can listen beyond stereotypical sound portraits to an engagement with sonic subtleties of a place, a stronger sense of its rhythmicity, and a deeper and richer listening experience that comes through hearing a place through hours and seasons. As with the practice of an acoustic instrument, repeated attention to what may seem like mundane details of phrasing, articulation, perspective, and approach can yield satisfaction, skill and engagement with time.

Tenney thinks about the relationship between his body and the sounding environment. He thinks about the impossibility of carrying on a conversation with another person in that loud vehicle, mentioning in passing an aspect of the sounding environment that might become the focus of interest for an acoustic ecologist. This ability to hear a conversation is a test of audibility that is recommended by acoustic ecologists such as Hildegard Westerkamp when thinking about the human scale of sound environments (Westerkamp 1974). But what I have not yet found in the literature of acoustic ecology or environmental health is a discussion of the organization and politics of noise measurement, through the use of the A-weighting decibel scale, which was designed to mimic the human ear, rather than the C-weighting scale which includes the low frequencies and would more accurately track the effect of traffic noise as vibration as well as sound. These noise measurement standards, established in the 1920s, are now used internationally for research and noise complaints. For instance, a contemporary large-scale study on traffic noise and health risks published in *Environmental Health* used the A-weighting scale without question (2011). The sound of traffic is very loud in the

frequencies below 20 Hz that are measured by the C-weighting decibel scale. When we were measuring sound levels for the Lachine canal soundwalk project, we found that traffic noise in the part of the park close to the highway, measured with the C-weighting scale, was as much as 20 decibels higher than with the A-scale that excluded the low frequencies. Perhaps the use of the A-weighting scale is because of an overt focus on hearing over touch as a way of sensing sound, but its result is to minimize traffic noise as a concern.

But if noise legislation focuses overtly on the ears, it ignores the reality that we do feel (especially low-frequency) sound as much as we hear it. Tenney refers to a full-bodied listening that exceeds his ears. Like many participants on my soundwalks who speak of heightened awareness in all their senses during the time of the walk, Tenney refers not just to hearing in his discussion of the traffic sounds. He speaks of analyzing the sounds using kinesthetics, feeling the sounds through movement “to feel, kinesthetically, the characteristic rhythmic articulations.” Is this kind of rhythmic synesthesia encouraged in mobile listening experiences, and even more so in mobile recording? Many philosophers have written about how thinking is somehow facilitated through linking it with bodily motion, what we might call the philosopher’s walk (see for instance Thoreau 1862). And as I have noted earlier (2004), sound recordists such as Pierre Schaeffer as well as many field recordists since then have commented on how hearing small sounds amplified by microphones during recording really brings the recordist in touch with those sounds, how the sense of touch amplifies the sense of hearing in those frequencies that are felt as well as heard, that are moved by the recordist in response to hearing and touching.

Tenney thinks about the specificity of this kind of noise, how the sound of traffic in the tunnel is similar to but also different from ocean surf with its periodic waves. He wants to explore the aperiodicity found in the tunnel with its dense, constant soundscape. The different periodicities of traffic sounds become themes in many of my group soundwalks, given that traffic noise is the most ubiquitous sound in many places, the most constant and pervasive. Participants notice how the group walk is punctuated by traffic lights providing a phrasing of movement, how the power of a sizeable group moving together sometimes allows us to stop automobile traffic, the moments when sounds of the group are masked by nearby traffic, all of this phrasing making rhythmicity audible, the rhythms of the city (thinking here of Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* 2004). It is also worth noting that Tenney’s depiction of traffic sound as similar to ocean waves is one that is repeated in my study: I have had a long conversation with an anonymous audience member about a research video posted on YouTube, a conversation which is all about traffic. This listener lives very close to a major highway and several cross streets in Montreal, and describes traffic as the “static” of his life. The way that he has found to live with it is to imagine the traffic as rushing water, and to meditate. He hears patterns of weather and urban life in the traffic sound, so this static has meaning but is it meaningful?

That listener decided to meditate and try to accept the traffic sound, whereas Tenney’s approach in the tunnel was to listen, analyze and begin composing a piece based on those sounds, what Barry Truax (2001) might call creating an electroacoustic alternative. For Tenney, the experience becomes meaningful through this work with the sound. The act of listening to the sounds and analyzing them while thinking of composition, becomes a pleasurable activity, something that Tenney looks forward to instead of dreading. I think it is here that Tenney’s approach to listening in this context, and my practice of soundwalking, share an important potential for meaningfulness as well as meaning. It is in the pleasure of

listening that this potential is found. Helmi Jarviluoma writes about re-sounding pleasure as an important part of meaningfulness in how people experience sounds of their environment (Jarviluoma 2012). A participant in her study of one hundred Finnish soundscapes describes how hearing a familiar tune while on the attic stairs of his parents' house moves him, enlivens him and will sustain him through his working days to come. It is not just the tune that is important in the account, but also its listening context, in the shadowy intimacy of the familiar attic stairs. It is in such moments of pleasure and attention that meaningfulness as well as meaning is found through everyday soundscapes. Pleasure and attention can be extended into the creation of the kind of stochastic structure for composition that Tenney made for the Noise Study, it can be extended into sustained engagement with a place through soundwalks over time with different artists and groups, and it can be extended into direct, repeated, live and social-media conversations about different recording sites and listening experiences like those that characterize the Soundwalking Interactions project.

There will be a soundwalk immediately following this conference, and you are welcome to join us if you like. It will begin right outside that door and will take approximately an hour including a discussion. The aim is to explore the area immediately surrounding this space, an area you have already encountered several times in the last few days. The whole soundwalk will be recorded. Eventually, there will be a report on the walk posted on the research blog, with a link to an abbreviated representation of the walk on a YouTube video, paired with still images. If you are interested in participating in the research project and cannot come to the walk today, please consider doing your own soundwalk in Stockholm or elsewhere and send me an email or post a comment to the Soundwalking Interactions research blog. Thank you.

References

JARVILUOMA Helmi, "Re-sounding pleasure in soundscape studies", Wi, In press, expected publication fall 2012.

LEFEBVRE Henri, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, London, Continuum, 2004.

MCCARTNEY Andra, "Soundscape works, listening and the touch of sound", *Aural Cultures*, edited by Jim Drobnick, Toronto, ON, YYZ, 2004, pp. 179-185.

POLANSKY Larry, "The Early Works of James Tenney", *Soundings 13*, Santa Fe (NM), 1984, pp. 154-155.

SORENSEN Mette et al, "Exposure to road traffic and railway noise and associations with blood pressure and self-reported hypertension: a cohort study", *Environmental Health 10*, 2011, pp. 89-105.

TENNEY James, *Meta+Hodos*, 2nd edition, Hanover (New Hampshire), Frog Peak Music, 1992.

THOREAU Henry David, *Walking*, Bedford (Massachusetts), Applewood, (1^{re} éd. 1862).

TRUAX Barry, *Acoustic Communication*, 2nd edition, Norwood (New Jersey), Ablex Publishing, 2001.