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“From Trains to Plains: An Historical-Critical Consideration of Soundscape Composition”

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From Trains to Plains: An historical-critical consideration of soundscape composition

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According to esteemed electroacoustic composer Barry Truax, “soundscape composition” is understood as “a form of electroacoustic music characterized by the presence of recognizable environmental sounds and contexts, the purpose being to invoke the listener’s associations, memories, and imagination related to the soundscape” (Truax, n.d.). The intent of this paper is to problematize the central concepts of this definition—“environmental” and “electroacoustic”—within an historical examination of the use of “real-world” sounds in music composition.

The incorporation of environmental sounds into electronic music composition was strongly underscored right at the beginning of *musique concrète*, with Pierre Schaeffer’s *Étude aux chemins de fer* (1948). Using the limited recording and studio technology available, train sounds were recorded, manipulated and shaped into a formal musical structure. One cannot help noting the marked difference of this work from the others of the set, *Cinq études de bruits*, in its intent to guide the listener outside the studio to location sounds that could have been recorded nowhere else but where they originated: in this case, a train station. The choice of train sounds underscores a strong connection to one of the earliest (and most influential, historically) films, *L’arrivée d’un train à la Ciotat*, by Auguste and Louis Lumière, from 1895. While this etude by Schaeffer has been extremely influential, there were precedents for the use of recorded and real-world sounds that are worth pointing out for historical record. Experimental film-maker Walter Ruttmann produced *Wochende* in 1930. This work was billed as “an experimental film with sound only, no image.” This soundtrack presents aural recordings of life in Berlin: trains, traffic, etc. Earlier, in 1927, Ruttmann had created a silent film of life in Berlin, which he gave the musical title of *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. Like *Wochende*, this work was less a documentary than a collage, presenting fragments of life in the city, organized in an abstract, musical fashion rather than following a more conventional narrative structure.

Prior to the advent of audiovisual technology, the *Intonarumori* orchestra of noise-instruments produced as a consequent of Luigi Russolo’s Futurist manifesto *The Art of Noises* (1913) proved influential for a number of composers. These would include Erik Satie, who added typewriters and other “non-musical” sounds to his score for *Parade* in 1917. Other Futurist-influenced composers include Igor Stravinsky (*Les Noces*, 1923, scored for voices, pianos, and percussion), George Antheil (*Ballet mécanique*, 1925, for pianos, percussion, and airplane engine, and intended to accompany an experimental film by Ferdinand Léger), and Edgard Varèse (*Ionisations*, 1931, for percussion ensemble including siren). Experimental audiovisual work from the 1920s influenced Alban Berg, who planned a substantial film episode for his opera *Lulu*, unfinished when he died in 1935.

Long before Varèse combined an instrumental ensemble with studio-produced interjections in his *Déserts* (1954), Italian composer Ottorino Respighi specified recorded birdsong be inserted into his orchestral work *Pini de Roma*, in 1924. Respighi was only revolutionary in utilizing modern technology to represent a pastoral soundscape. He was otherwise following a long tradition of evoking birdsong and other environmental sound elements through notated musical means. Ludwig van Beethoven brought the nightingale, quail, and cuckoo into the concert hall in his *Symphony No. 6 “Pastoral”* (1808) through solo passages of the flute, oboe, and clarinet respectively. Antonio Vivaldi’s *Le Quattro stagioni* (1723) is another example of soundscape-based instrumental music (various sonic images from the four seasons are evoked in these pieces, including birds, wind, rain, etc.). Concurrent with the work of Pierre Schaeffer in Paris, Olivier Messiaen has presented birdsong and other environmental sounds in virtually all of his mature compositions for instruments and voices. One could cite the 18-part polyphony of birdsong in *Chronochromie* (1960), or the unmetered birdsong cadenza in a late work, *Concert à quatre* (1991, unfinished).

It is possible, therefore, to include environmental sounds in non-electroacoustic compositions. It is also possible to utilize environmental sounds in electroacoustic compositions in ways that do not intend to evoke natural soundscapes. Iannis Xenakis incorporates jet engine sounds and other recognizable *concrete* sounds in his first electroacoustic composition, *Diamorphose*, from 1957, but the sounds are layered and manipulated in ways that suggest more abstract compositional concerns. (Interestingly, Xenakis strongly evokes a Mediterranean soundscape in the opening of his 1978 electroacoustic composition, *Le diatope*, purely by means of studio-synthesized sounds.) Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu creates an evocative, but unnatural, soundworld in his early electroacoustic work *Sky, Horse, and Death* (1954). Perhaps most (in)famously, John Cage utilizes short fragments of real-world recordings to create an extremely dense sonic collage in his *Williams Mix* (1953). In this piece, the overwhelming rate and degree of sonic information (heard in random order on eight tracks) presented to the listener takes this work a great distance from even the most complex natural soundscape.

Composers have sometimes sought to incorporate soundscape elements as they are being heard outside the concert hall at the moment of presentation into musical composition. Cage did this in his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) by creating a score of tuning and volume directions for 12 shortwave radios. Karlheinz Stockhausen has created a number of scores that incorporate sounds picked up through a shortwave radio into music that otherwise involves instruments and/or voices (e.g., *Kurzwellen*, 1968). Gérard Grisey incorporates pulsar signals transmitted from outer space into his percussion ensemble work *Le Noir de l’Étoile* (1990).

The term “soundscape” was first coined by R. Murray Schafer in 1969 within the context of his “World Soundscape Project” at Simon Fraser University. His educational and acoustic ecology concerns led, among other things, to the development of the “soundwalk,” whereby participants listen to the sounds of the world they move through with as

much focused attention as they would listen to a piece of music being performed in a concert hall. The practice of soundwalk has been important to the compositional practice of Hildegard Westerkamp and Andra McCartney, among others. Murray Schafer himself has gone on to create acoustic compositions (primarily his *Patria* cycle) intended for performance in the wilderness: in a forest, around a lake, etc. The music is designed to include the environmental sounds along with singers and instrumentalists. *Princess of the Stars*, for example, is set on a lake and begins before dawn; the waking of the birds just prior to the sun coming up is part of the compositional intent.

One of the first explicit “soundscape” electroacoustic compositions was *Presque rien, No. 1* (1970) by Luc Ferrari. This work presents the sounds of a particular location over the course of a particular day. Ferrari attracted some controversy for the deliberate “naivety” of the work, presented as if it were nothing more than an audio record. In fact, a great deal of studio skill and finesse was required in order to edit and manipulate the field recordings (reducing many hours of tape to 20 minutes, for example) so that they would sound as (apparently) authentic as possible. One of the issues that Ferrari raises in his *Presque rien* series is the notion of “naturalness,” given that recordings are, by their very nature, unnatural. Hearing the world through the mediating presence of a microphone is a very different listening experience. Ferrari’s work brings us back to another aspect of Truax’ definition of soundscape composition: purpose. The intention “to invoke the listener’s associations, memories, and imagination related to the soundscape” can relate to a wide range of purposes. The acoustic ecology orientation advocated by Truax and Westerkamp, among others, seeks to increase sensitivity to, and concern for, natural environments (and the threats posed to them, potentially). Canadian composer Claude Schryer moves even further in that direction, adding a quasi-spiritual intent to soundscape recording. According to him, the Sharawadji Effect is “an aesthetic effect characterized by a sensation of plenitude sometimes created by the contemplation of a complex soundscape whose beauty is inexplicable” (*Musicworks* 70, 1998, p. 20).

The “environment” may also encompass the social, not just the natural. A soundscape might be built on the sounds of popular culture, an aspect of electroacoustic composition that Canadian sound artist John Oswald has explored extensively in his Plunderphonics works. Earlier examples of such work includes James Tenney’s *Collage #1 (Blue Suede)* from 1961, and *The Third Reich ‘N’ Roll* (1976). Remix artists have applied electroacoustic studio tools to reworking existing material, one example being Brian Transeau/BT’s 2004 remix of *Break On Through* by The Doors. These examples that draw on popular musical culture for their material certainly seek to “invoke the listener’s associations, memories, and imagination.”

To conclude, it seems that “soundscape composition” is a problematic label. The kinds of materials that tend to be associated with this term may be utilized in ways that do not seek to reference the source, while other composers seek to evoke natural soundscapes through acoustic-instrumental means. Cultural materials may also be treated in similar ways with similar intents. It may be more useful to develop a different way to categorize compositions, perhaps building upon the aural-mimetic discourse introduced by Simon Emmerson (*The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, London: MacMillan, 1986).