

# Soundscape

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On International Noise Awareness Day 1999 two hundred students walked through the city and did nothing but listen.

*The Journal of Acoustic Ecology*

# An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology

by Kendall Wrightson

I try to listen to  
the still, small voice within  
but I can't hear it  
above the din

from *Little Audrey's Story* by Eliza Ward

As a reader of this journal it is possible that you attach a certain significance to sound. Maybe you are a musician, an audio engineer, an architect, a foley artist, a marine biologist, or a composer of sonic art. Maybe you have studied sound in built environments, used sound in performance, in film or video, or researched sound under water and among animals. You may have noticed how important sound can be in communicating mood, meaning and context. Perhaps when listening to a “soundscape”—sound heard in a real or “virtual” environment—you have been transported to another time, another place. Conversely, maybe you have experienced the-here-and-now even more acutely as a result of listening intently. Your awareness of sound—specifically your *level* of awareness of the acoustic environment at any given time—is an issue central to the interdisciplinary of Acoustic Ecology (also known as ecoacoustics).

The philosophy underpinning Acoustic Ecology is simple yet profound: its author—R. Murray Schafer, a musician, composer and former Professor of Communication Studies at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, BC, Canada—suggests that we try to hear the acoustic environment as a musical composition and further, that we own responsibility for its composition (Schafer 1977a, 205). Like many issues emerging from the explosion of ideologies in the late 1960s, the profundity of Schafer's message is now hidden behind a single, soundbite-friendly issue: noise pollution. This is unfortunate since Schafer has far more to offer. However, some 22 years after his ideas were first fully articulated in print, they remain unknown to the general public and mostly unknown to environmental acousticians. Where Schafer is well known—within the contemporary music community—it is mostly for his large-scale, often site-specific, musical/theatrical work rather than his acoustic ecology. Composer John Cage was aware of both; when asked if he knew of any great music teachers, he replied “Murray Schafer of Canada” (Truax 1978, sleeve note).

*So what did Schafer say and what is its relevance at the beginning of a century?*

## Eye Culture

Schafer's starting point was to note the incredible dominance of the visual modality in society—“eye culture,” as it has been termed elsewhere<sup>1</sup>—and to reveal that children's ability to listen was, in his experience, deteriorating. So concerned was Schafer about this problem that he argued passionately for listening skills to become an integral part of the national curriculum. Schafer both demonstrated

and addressed the issue—which he termed “sonological competence”—through the practical exercises he developed in working with music students, such as: list any five environmental sounds (not music) that you remember hearing today; and list five sounds (not music) you like and five you do not.

As a lecturer in Music Technology, I often begin a lecture series with these exercises and I can confirm Schafer's experience: many students do not recall “consciously” having heard any sounds during the day, and many do not complete the sound list even after fifteen minutes. Schafer's response to the problem was to develop a range of “ear cleaning” exercises including “soundwalks,” a walking meditation where the object is to maintain a high level of sonic awareness (see Schafer 1967 and 1969).

By the early 1970s, Schafer had enrolled his colleagues at SFU into his work and the World Soundscape Project (WSP) was created, its first major project being a field study of the Vancouver Soundscape. The study involved level measurements (producing isobel maps), soundscape recordings and the description of a range of sonic features. The study resulted in both a book<sup>2</sup> and a collection of recordings.<sup>3</sup> Further WSP field studies in Europe led to the publication of *Five Village Soundscapes* (Schafer, 1978b) and *European Sound Diary* (Schafer, 1977b). Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* (1977a)<sup>4</sup> remains the best known and the most comprehensive text on Acoustic Ecology.

## Soundscape Features

A fascinating book that changed my understanding of—and relationship with—sound, *The Tuning of the World* formalised the soundscape terminology Schafer had devised during his field studies with the WSP: background sounds he defined as “keynotes” (in analogy to music where a keynote identifies the fundamental tonality of a composition around which the music modulates); foreground sounds (intended to attract attention) are termed “sound signals.” Sounds that are particularly regarded by a community and its visitors are called “soundmarks”—in analogy to landmarks. Natural examples of the latter include geysers, waterfalls and wind traps while cultural examples include distinctive bells and the sounds of traditional activities. (Schafer 1977a: 9, 55-56, 173-175, 272-275; Truax 1978: 68, 119, 127; 1984: 22, 58-60).

Schafer's terminology helps to express the idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals and soundmarks) can—like local architecture, customs and dress—express a community's identity to the extent that settlements can be recognised and characterised by their soundscapes. Unfortunately, since the industrial revolution, an ever increasing number of unique soundscapes have disappeared completely or submerged into the cloud of homogenised, anonymous noise that is the contemporary city soundscape, with its ubiquitous keynote—traffic.

The contrast between pre-industrial and post-industrial acoustic environments is well expressed in Schafer's use of the terms “hi-

fi” (high fidelity) to characterise the former and “lo-fi” (low fidelity) to describe the latter (1977a, 272). He defines a hi-fi soundscape as an environment where “sounds overlap less frequently; there is more perspective—foreground and background” (1977a, 43). In transcribing recordings of hi-fi environments, Schafer’s team noted that the level of natural environmental sounds—such as weather and animals—varied in repeating cycles. The team created a rudimentary level versus time diagram charting the more prominent sonic features of the soundscape over a twelve month period (reproduced below as Figure 1).

Schafer concluded that the vocal “give and take” between species (evident in Figure 1) is probably a characteristic feature of natural soundscapes. In addition to the rhythmic balance in sound level Schafer identified in natural habitats, Krause (1993) suggested an equilibrium is also apparent across the audio spectrum. The possibility of a natural spectral balance occurred to Krause during long sojourns in the wilderness as he attempted to record the vocalisations of specific creatures. Listening intently to the soundscape to capture specific sounds (often waiting for up to thirty hours in one sitting), Krause noticed that “When a bird sang or a mammal or amphibian vocalised, the voices appeared to fit in relation to all the natural sounds in terms of frequency and prosody (rhythm)” (1993, 159).

Acoustical spectrographic maps transcribed from 2,500 hours of recordings confirmed his suspicions: animal and insect vocalisations tended to occupy small bands of frequencies leaving “spectral niches” (bands of little or no energy) into which the vocalisations (fundamental and formants) of other animals, birds or insects can fit. As urban areas spread Krause suggested, the accompanying noise might “block” or “mask” spectral niches and, if mating calls go unheard, a species might die out (1993, 158). While there has been little corroborative research into Krause’s “Niche Hypothesis,” (or into Schafer’s suggestion that give and take occurs in terms of sound level), a recent Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) study suggested that birds living near roads “... cannot hear one another which leads to difficulty in learning songs and communicating with potential mates” (Barot 1999).

In acoustics, the word “mask” has a very specific meaning.<sup>5</sup> The relevance of this effect for the soundscape is that since quieter sounds do not generally mask each other (unless their frequencies are close together), a hi-fi soundscape can be characterised by its lack of masking from noise and other sounds, with the result that all sounds—of all frequencies—“can be heard distinctly” (Schafer, 43). As SFU colleague Hildegard Westerkamp puts it, there is “no anonymous sound.” The lack of masking facilitates the propagation of

“acoustic colouration” caused by echoes and reverberations that occur as sound is absorbed and reflected from surfaces within the environment, and due to the effects of weather related factors such as temperature, wind and humidity. The resulting colouration offers significant information for the listener, providing cues relating to the physical nature of the environment and expressing its size in relation to the listener. This fosters a sense of place for individuals as they move around the community. SFU colleague Barry Truax conveys this concept well when he states “... the sound arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, because as the wave travels, it is charged by each interaction with the environment” (Truax 1984, 15).

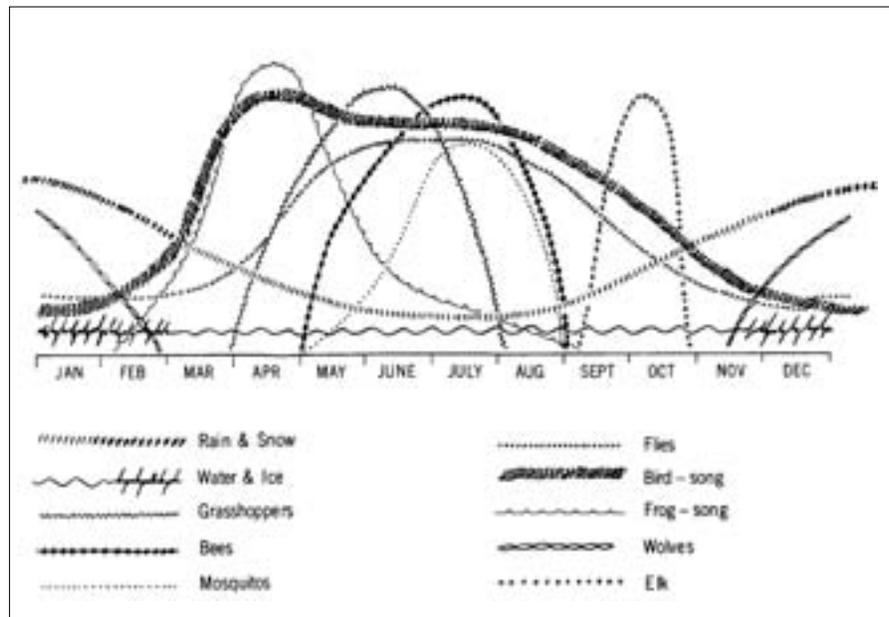
Another characteristic of the pre-industrial revolution, hi-fi soundscape, is that the “acoustic horizon” may extend for many miles. Thus sounds emanating from a listener’s own community may be

heard at a considerable distance, reinforcing a sense of space and position and maintaining a relationship with home. This sense is further strengthened when it is possible to hear sounds emanating from adjacent settlements, establishing and maintaining relationships between local communities.

In the lo-fi soundscape, meaningful sounds (and any associated acoustic colouration), can be masked to such an extent that an individual’s “aural space” is reduced.

Where the effect is so pronounced that an individual can no longer hear the reflected sounds of his/her own movement or speech, aural space has effectively shrunk to enclose the individual, isolating the listener from the environment. If the masking of reflected and direct sounds is so severe that an individual cannot hear his/her own footsteps—which is common on the streets of many cities—“... one’s aural space is reduced to less than that of human proportions” (Truax 1984, 20). Under such extreme conditions, sound is either smothered (in the sense that particular sounds are not heard) or, sounds merge and sonic information mutates into anti-information: “noise.”

While the hi-fi soundscape is—Acoustic Ecologists suggest—balanced in terms of level, spectra and rhythm, the lo-fi soundscape features an almost constant level. This creates a “Sound Wall” (Schafer 1977a, 93), isolating the listener from the environment. Spectrally, the contemporary lo-fi soundscape is biased towards the low frequency range (thanks to the internal combustion engine and sounds related to electric power). Due to the twenty-four hour society, the rhythms of daily routine are, in some localities, significantly eroded.



**Figure 1: The cycles of the natural soundscape of the west coast of British Columbia showing the relative level of sounds (from Truax 1984: 142).**

## The Soundscape and Society

In describing the soundscape's capacity to convey information, Truax (1984) describes sound as a mediator between listener and the environment. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.

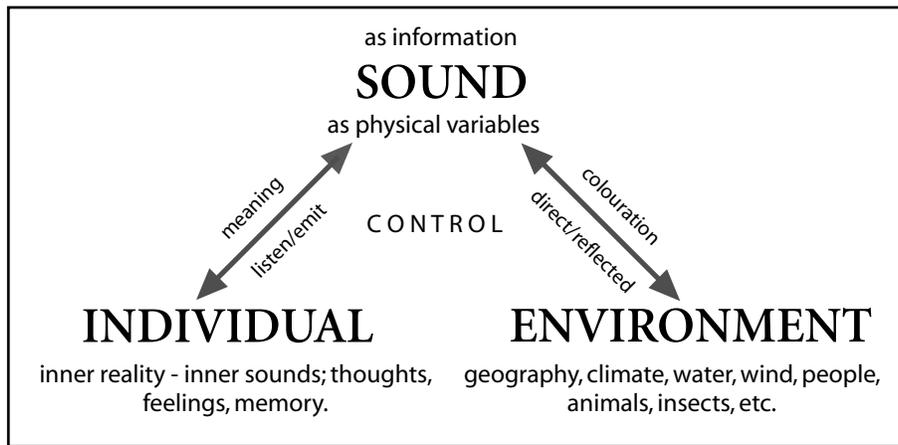
As the soundscape deteriorates, so awareness of the subtleties of environmental sound has withered in proportion. As a result, the meanings sound holds

for the listener in contemporary soundscapes tend to be polarised into extremes—"loud" and "quiet"; noticed or unnoticed; good (I like) or bad (I don't like). Compare this level of sonic awareness (and the results of the listening tests mentioned earlier) with the Kaluli men of Papua New Guinea who, according to Feld (1994) can "... imitate the sound of at least 100 birds, but few can provide visual descriptive information on nearly that many." In other words, environmental sounds for the Kaluli tribe comprise a continuum offering a limitless range of subtleties.

In the developed world, sound has less significance and the opportunity to experience "natural" sounds decreases with each generation due to the destruction of natural habitats. Sound becomes something that the individual tries to block, rather than to hear; the lo-fi, low information soundscape has nothing to offer. As a result, many individuals try to shut it out through the use of double glazing or with acoustic perfume—music. Music—the virtual soundscape—is, in this context, used as a means to control the sonic environment rather than as a natural expression of it. Broadcast speech and music provide the same opportunity for control, turning the sonic environment into a commodity. Networks, transmitters and satellites extend the acoustic community across the entire planet, a fact that has been utilised for fair deeds and foul. Schafer refers to the latter use of sound as "sound imperialism" (1977a, 77).

A 1993 survey of public attitudes to noise in the United Kingdom lists "neighbours"—and specifically sources of broadcast or recorded sound (which Schafer calls "schizophonic" sound)—as the premier source of irritation, toppling traffic from the number one spot it had occupied for many years (Grimwood, 1993). As Slapper (1996) reports: "Nationally, councils now receive 300 complaints a day about unacceptable noise from neighbours" and more disturbingly "Over the past four years, 18 people have been killed" [due to disputes over noisy neighbours].

The psychological significance of sound used as a controlling force—as an (offensive) weapon or as a (defensive) barrier against the soundscape—is that the environment and the community become the enemy. As with any war, the environment becomes a battle-



**Figure 2: The mediating relationship of an individual to the environment through sound (modified from Truax 1984, 11).**

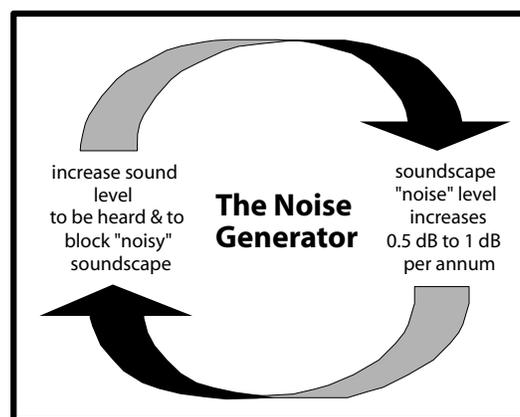
ground and suffers as much as its inhabitants. Schafer estimated that the battle between sonic expression and control was helping to increase environmental sound levels by around 0.5 to 1 decibel per year—a "noise generator" as illustrated in Figure 3.

## Inner Noise

If community and environmental noise

is the enemy without, the noise of unwanted thoughts and feelings represents the enemy within. The use of sound as an "audioanalgesic" (Schafer 1977a, 96)—a soundwall to block the unceasing (and often critical) inner dialogue and the uncomfortable emotions the dialogue evinces—provides the illusion of mastery over emotion. A basic tenet of psychotherapy is the notion that unexpressed thoughts and feelings can result in inappropriate actions ranging from a burst of anger over an insignificant event, to the kind of horrific incidents that seem increasingly, to make the front pages of newspapers the world over. Despite an increased awareness of psychotherapeutic principles, the belief that emotion is somehow controlled through distraction prevails.

The physical and psychological cost of unexpressed emotion is an epidemic of stress related illnesses that reflects a struggle to adapt to a new way of living—the speed, busy-ness and sustained arousal of city life. Such is the contrast between the character of life in towns and cities compared to that in rural and tranquil areas, that Newman & Lonsdale (1995) refer to city dwellers as *homo urbanus*. Appreciative descriptions of the "buzz" of the city frequently refer to its noise, as well as its speed and activity (Newman & Lonsdale 1995, 34). As



**Figure 3: The Noise Generator (source: the author)**

the city represents excitement, so the countryside, the plains and wilderness areas have come, for many, to represent boredom and incredibly, a disconnection from life, since "life" has become associated with continuous noise and activity. The corollary to this is that "quiet" and highly differentiated environments—characteristics of hi-fi soundscapes—are equated with boredom, conformity, lassitude, lack of choice "... and most importantly, the fear of being out of touch." (Newman & Lonsdale 1995, 10). The latter expression is a masterly example of sophistry since while being "in touch" with the noise of opinion and technol-

ogy (objectivity), the quiet reality of how "I" feel now (subjectivity)—is devalued or ignored.

In my view, the hi-fi environment represents a deep psychological fear for anyone whose purpose (consciously or unconsciously) is to avoid their feelings. In a wide variety of psychotherapeutic experiences, I have witnessed many times—in myself and others—how being quiet tends to bring emotions to the surface. As psychologist

James Swan quoted in Gallagher (1993, 203) offers: “Just sitting quietly in that atmosphere [a quiet place] allows most people to process a lot of emotions and issues they haven’t been dealing with.”

It is no coincidence that in much art and literature, nature is used to symbolise emotion: both are wild and uncontrollable and the history of humanity could be described in terms of a need to dominate both. This domination has taken the form of ephemeral realities built upon life-as-it-is. In the case of nature, the construction refers to electrically powered communities whose ephemerality is a function of their power source. Contemporary society cannot operate without electricity—if the plug is pulled by nature, terrorists or the depletion of natural resources, society will collapse. As for emotion, the ephemeral constructions are the “schizophonic” sounds, television pictures and eventually, the “data suits” and other “cybersense” technologies that are creating a “virtual” reality. Built on top of the electric society, cyber-reality is twice as ephemeral, doubly fragile.

### Acoustic Ecology Today

Schafer suggests that there are two ways to improve the soundscape. The first is to increase sonological competence through an education programme that attempts to imbue new generations with an appreciation of environmental sound. This he believes, will foster a new approach to design—the second way—that will incorporate an appreciation of sound and thus reduce the wasted energy that noise represents.

Schafer’s ideas are laudable and I endorse them. However it is vital that Acoustic Ecologists do not underestimate what Schafer is asking; in order to listen we need to stop or at least slow down—physically and psychologically, becoming a human being instead of a “human doing.” “Be here now” is one of the main messages to emerge during the 1960s, and a major tenet of the multitude of Eastern philosophies that have been imported into the west ever since. For *homo urbanus*, stopping and listening is a tough call, though many try and keep trying. For others, being here now, listening to the soundscape, valuing the soundscape, is anathema. Porteous (1990) confirms this in his critique of the original WSP surveys noting that “experts” always bring with them their own agenda. In this case, he says, the agenda is that people *should* value the soundscape, specifically a balanced one; surveys of public opinion, he notes, indicate that the people—the “inerts”—do not.

Today, interest in Acoustic Ecology is growing thanks to the activities of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), which was founded during The First International Conference on Acoustic Ecology in Banff, Alberta, Canada, in August of 1993. Through newsletters, this new journal, regular conferences (since 1993) and more recently a listserver and web site available to anyone with access to the Internet, knowledge of acoustic ecology and the activities of the WFAE is beginning to spread to a wider audience; Westerkamp (1995) reports that the WFAE has enrolled steering committee representatives in Europe, Asia-Pacific, South/Central America and the USA and has had a well-functioning international board since 1998.

In summary then, it is my view that the values espoused by Acoustic Ecology—the value of listening, the quality of the soundscape—are values worth evangelising. However, it is vital that we do not underestimate the enormity of what we are asking at the end of the busiest, loudest century in recorded history.

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individual, technology, sound and music is a current passion. Kendall is a founder member of SoundscapeUK, the Internet discussion list of the UKI Soundscape Community.

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### Notes

1. The dominance of eye culture at the expense of the aural modality is explored in Berendt, J. E. [trans. Nevil, T.] *The Third Ear*, Henry Holt, New York, 1988.
2. Schafer, R. M. [Ed.] *The Vancouver Soundscapes*, ARC Publications, 1978a.
3. Now available as a double CD set including a 1996 comparative study: *The Vancouver Soundscape 1973/Soundscape Vancouver 1996*, Cambridge, 1996. Records CSR-2CD 9701.
4. Schafer, R. M. *The Tuning of the World*, Knopf, New York, 1977. [republished in 1994 as *The Soundscape—Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Rochester, Vermont].
5. Over a relatively narrow frequency range, quiet sounds will be inaudible (i.e. “masked”) in the presence of loud sounds of a lower frequency. If the frequencies of two sounds are within a few hertz, a beating effect is heard which makes it easier to detect the masked tone (Backus, 1977, pp. 101-103).



# Learning is Living

## Acoustic Ecology as Pedagogical Ground A Report on Experience

by Lena Dietze

Translated from the German by Norbert Ruebsaat

*Presented at the Symposium: "Acoustic Ecology and Ecological Aesthetics," June 6, 1999 as part of the larger festival Stadtstimmen (City Voices), conceptualized by Sabine Breitsameter and organized by the city of Wiesbaden, Germany, March to October 1999.*

“Every place has its own sound. Do you hear it?” We wrote this on the handouts we distributed when we mounted our mass soundwalk in Wiesbaden on April 21, 1999. We were participating in an Action to accompany the opening of the project, *City Voices*. Two hundred students walked through Wiesbaden and did not talk, but only listened. And it is astonishing to hear a grade 9 boy, Joe, who at the beginning was sceptical of the action, say: “I heard sounds I had never heard before, car noises, for example, or bird songs. I paid special attention to certain things. I thought it was awesome. I never experienced anything like this before.”

Of course we are surrounded by traffic noise every day. We also take birdsong for granted. But we are not aware of these. And on the day of the Action, Joe and many others became conscious. They suddenly heard things in a different way.

My intent is to show, using a few examples from my teaching practice, what I do with students from my base in the area of acoustic ecology, what I consider important, why I consider it important, and what goals I have in mind. I will not speak about schools in general, but will limit myself to a few concrete projects connected with *City Voices: Soundscape Wiesbaden*.

Murray Schafer gave us the pedagogical groundwork for acoustic ecology more than thirty years ago. He is the soundscape pioneer and our work builds on his. Back then he wrote of the soundscape: “It is a word I invented. It describes all the sound events of which a landscape, a place, a space is composed - the entire acoustic environment of our daily lives, wherever we may be, at home, at work, indoors, outdoors.”

He developed *Ear Cleaning* and, in *A Sound Education* he published one hundred listening and soundmaking exercises which form a basis for our current sound ecology work with students.

### Landscape as Soundscape

Acoustic ecology is concerned with listening. Only the person who listens hears. And if I sensitize myself to listening and open my ears to the sounds of the environment, I pay attention also to the unique characteristics of soundscapes. Over time, I hear more and more and develop the ability to discriminate. I notice what I find pleasant or unpleasant, what creates stress and what makes me happy. In school my primary concern is not to turn students immediately into environmentalists, but to open their ears and simply listen.

Soundscapes are everywhere, in our immediate surroundings, in our homes, on the street, in cities, in the countryside, by the sea, in the water, in the forest, in San Francisco, in Vancouver, on an island in the North Sea, or in Wiesbaden.

It is useful now and again to experience soundscapes as if they were concerts. We naturally go to a concert, sit down, and listen. If we go into nature or into any environment as if to a concert, new worlds of listening open up. When one actually listens consciously, pauses, and listens to the voice of a robin or to the rustling of wind in a poplar tree this becomes a special experience. It becomes an inner listening experience like a concert. A student writes: “These conscious listening experiences are the keys to one’s own *inner* soundscapes” (Fedor, grade 10).

### Soundwalking

On a soundwalk one doesn’t walk and talk, one walks and listens. The instruction about not talking is important for two reasons. The first is clear: when you talk you are not listening. Secondly, when you talk you are already talking-over, talking-about. You are evaluating and interpreting. And this is precisely what should not happen. One should just listen and experience.

Soundwalks can be taken in groups or alone. There is also the classical form, where one goes in pairs, with one partner blindfolded while the other leads. Not seeing always intensifies the listening experience. So even on a soundwalk without a blindfold, it makes sense to close ones eyes occasionally and just listen.

When we had the chance to take part, as a school, in the project *City Voices*, the idea was to use *International Noise Awareness Day*, April 21, 1999, to draw special attention to the activity of listening. We discussed a number of possibilities beforehand: for example that the students might walk, in star formation, from different points into the centre of the city where they would perform sound events. We also had the idea of using a performance to draw attention to the terrible leaf blowers which have replaced the quiet raking of leaves in our cities. Another idea was to have students perform an event in which, carrying ghetto blasters on their shoulders, they would sweep past in a kind of technocloud—which is also a part of our soundscape and of our youth culture, just as are the cars which drive past like a soundcloud filled with technomusic.

It seemed to make little sense, however, to add more noise to the already noisy city. We didn’t want to make noise in order to make passersby listen. Instead, we wondered how we might use an action to make people aware of the voices, sounds and noises in our environment. And for me that meant walking-and-listening, using get-up and self-presentation to bring the message to others’ awareness. The then cultural officer, Reinhard Strömer, liked the idea. So the artist and musician Dirk Marwedel of the Wiesbadener Group

ARTist, and I as sound pedagogue, were able to act under the auspices of the Cultural Office. Not noise, but awareness was the point of the action: sensitivity training for the ear.

We were able to involve four schools in the project: the Helene-Lange-School (integrated High School) at which I teach, and the Elly-Heuß, Dilthey and Gutenberg Schools (Gymnasias). In the latter it was music teachers with their grade eight, nine and ten students who participated. The collaboration between the different schools was enjoyed by all, and motivated and inspired us.

The preparatory phase was the most important part. It produced the actual pedagogical effect. We took initial soundwalks with the participating groups of students and later discussed our experiences.

These conversations about what we had heard intensified our awareness of the sound environment. Many students said later that the small group soundwalks were more intense. They listened more and heard more—whereas during the larger Action everyone was busy with the organization, the process, the timetable, and attention to proper staging. And of course one can't be as quiet in a group of 200 students as one can in the smaller group. The message nevertheless got across.

Of course at the beginning the students felt odd to be walking around doing nothing but listening. "What's this about," they asked. "We listen all the time. What's so special about it?" A few teachers and students found it so useless and silly that they refused from the start to participate. As we were planning our first soundwalk one student said: "When we started walking last Tuesday I felt pretty stupid. I wondered if it could still be called normal to walk around the city just listening to sounds. People will think you're crazy, I thought. But then when we got to the city it wasn't so bad" (Cristina, Grade 9).

On *International Noise Awareness Day* we were in the downtown area with 200 students. The Action was called *Wiesbaden Er-hören* (Listening to Wiesbaden)—a staged soundwalk. The students were experiencing things and tried also, by way of this Action, to get passersby and motorists to become aware of listening.

Dress and presentation on the students' part were important aspects of the performance. Everyone wore black T-shirts. On the back of each was a big white ear. And on the front each person had a letter. When students came together in groups, words thus materialized, all of which had to do with listening: "listen," in different languages: "Hören," "Écouter," "Dinlemek," and "Audio," "Sound," "Klang," "Noise," "Lärm." A large group spelled out the day's theme: "International Noise Awareness Day."

Our soundwalk began in the Kurpark am Warmen Damm (City

Park). The park as soundscape: birdsong, water fountains and car noise in the background. Wilhelm Street, Wiesbaden's showpiece shopping street, which is also very noisy, was the scene of the first Action: 200 students stood in a long line close to the car traffic silently in word-groups and did nothing but listen for five minutes. At the half-way point they all turned like sandwichboard people and the two hundred ears could be seen from the other side.

Later on the market square they were able to listen to the typical market sounds, and shortly before noon they heard one of Wiesbaden's soundmarks, the carillon of the market church, played, on that day, live. The students stood in word-groups, saying nothing, only listening.



Jürgen Heller

At the corner of Burg Street and An den Quellen the traffic was again very loud. And at the end everyone gathered at the Spa Hotel and stood in the shape of a large ear around the spa fountain and listened for five minutes. Many found this the best part of the Action. They liked the peacefulness and the fact they could look at each other.

Almost all passersby reacted positively and with interest. Many were initially

annoyed, asked questions, and upon having the proceedings explained to them, thought what the students were doing was a good thing.

#### **Students' experiences and responses to the Action:**

"I didn't think we 200 students would be able to walk more or less quietly through the city and become aware of the sounds.

It was the first time I found traffic noise annoying.

It was the first time I really listened to the sounds of the market-place.

I thought all the black T-shirts were a great sight" (Katharina, Grade 8).

"Today I became aware of city sounds for the first time. I never noticed them before. I discovered by listening that the noise in Wiesbaden is caused mainly by automobiles. My experience was that one should walk through the city with open ears more often.... The highlight of the Action for me was when at the end on the bowling green all the students from the different schools applauded.... All in all I thought the Day of Action was lots of fun, and I found it interesting to walk through Wiesbaden with a different orientation, that is, listening" (Julia, Grade 8).

"I could take in the sounds of Wiesbaden better and more intensively on this walk because I had an occasion to listen.... When I walk through Wiesbaden normally, I don't think very much about the traffic noise. On this walk, though, I became conscious that the



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traffic noise was extreme in comparison to the quiet in the Park, where you hear almost only birds.... I especially liked the one moment during the Action when it was totally quiet. This was when we were on the grass by the Spa hotel. Only two people were talking into what was actually silence” (Sophia, Grade 8).

What was meaningful for the participants and constituted the wider effect was that listening was moved into the foreground of consciousness.

### School as Acoustic Space

This is another *City Voices* project. Through a variety of workshops elementary school pupils explore the sounds of their environment and play with the sounds to create a new soundworld. I am planning a soundwalk through the school grounds with the Grade Three class at Nordenstadt Elementary School. We collect sounds, listen and try things out. Then we will take a classical soundwalk with blindfolds: ten children will take visitors to ten different “sound stations” in the school yard. The sounds and noises will be produced by the rest of the class. There will be sounds of drainpipes, of the Ocean Drum, a gong, water sounds and noises made with plastic, paper, glass and metal. Each child brought one sound to a recent meeting. Wearing blindfolds, they took turns listening to the individual sounds. What was impressive was the variety of sounds and also the quiet and concentration experienced by the class.

It is important, during listening exercises, to be actively involved and to make sounds. The movement of the Ocean Drum, of water, or that of the drain pipe needs to be experimented with and experienced. This produces a feeling of coordination between movement and sound. It’s also fun for the children. They can produce special sounds with simple implements. And everything makes sound!

To lead a soundwalk has its pleasures, too. The child who is leading pays particular attention to that which is to be listened to, and leads the blindfolded partner carefully forward. The sound stands at the centre. The leader is curious and inwardly present and awake. Murray Schafer made this point in 1967: “As a practising musician I have come to realize that one learns about sound only by making sound, about music only by making music.”

The *City Voices* project of the Wiesbaden Cultural Planning Office has been profoundly motivating. The Cultural Office is to be congratulated for its support. Listening, which has been largely marginalized by overall media developments, achieves official recognition and support. Many students have trouble with listening. They are restless and easily distracted. Involving them in environ-

mental sounds and in soundscapes allows them completely unaccustomed access to the activity of listening, access that moves not through language or assignments, but through personal discovery. Listening as life enrichment.



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Graphic of Ear: Dirk Marwedel

### Notes

- 1 R. Murray Schafer as quoted in *GEO* 7/98, p. 82.
- 2 *Ibid.*, *Ear Cleaning*. Toronto: Berandol Music Limited, 1967.
- 3 *Ibid.*, *A Sound Education—100 Exercises in Listening and Sound-Making*. Indian River: Arcana Editions, 1992.
- 4 *Ibid.*, *Ear Cleaning*. Toronto: Berandol Music Limited, 1967, p. 1.



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