
Sound, Listening and Place: The aesthetic dilemma

BARRY TRUAX

School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada
E-mail: truax@sfu.ca

A purely aesthetic approach may be problematic when artists wish to deal with the external world as part of their work.

technological mediation. I saw that a communicational model could transcend, as well as incorporate, both the objective scientific model of sound as energy and signal transfer, and the purely subjective listener-centred approach of soundscape studies. The basic model of acoustic communication is grounded in the understanding that information and meaning arise through listening from both the inner structure and patterns of sound itself and also the listener's knowledge of context. In other words, both inner and outer complexity inform our understanding of sound. Further, sound is not merely information exchange, but is capable of creating relationships between listeners and their environment in a dynamic process of embodied cognition. This mediating role of sound creates the possibility of the 'acoustic community', examples of which are outlined in the Finnish study of six European villages (Järvilouma, Kytö, Truax, Uimonen and Vikman 2009) that re-visited the five villages the WSP had studied in 1975, hence providing a longitudinal dimension to the study. This updated study showed how fluid the cultural dynamics of an acoustic community are, as it evolves with economic and social change and deals with issues

art, where scientific data is mapped onto sound

and Lewis in northern Scotland (Drever 2002). In this project and its meticulous documentation, the recordists not only engaged the local public via the recordings they made, but enabled the locals to make their own recordings and facilitated a group composition as an outcome. In addition, listening exercises and sound journals were practised in the local school and examples recorded. In other words, the soundscape was not interpreted as raw material to be exploited in a quasi-industrial mining and post-production project, even if it left the soundscape more intact than the physical counterpart does with the landscape. In fact, it seems quite likely that a learning experience was initiated with the local population whose eventual influence and results could not be foreseen.

My own practical suggestion with regard to soundscape recording and composition is to begin

simple ring of eight speakers around the audience

4. THE EVOLVING NATURE OF LISTENERS AND SPACE

One of the many implications of electrification in the twentieth century is that it fundamentally changed listeners' relationships to their everyday acoustic spaces by allowing sounds originating from a different space and time to be introduced arbitrarily into both public and private spaces. Whereas mechanical technology had introduced a different scale of noise intensity into the soundscape, often with negative effects on individuals, electrification introduced a choice of sound, most notably music, to be added to a space, with varying degrees of public acceptance. Although the early experiments with the Telharmonium allowed music to be piped into upscale New York restaurants in 1907 to create a pleasant musical ambience, and coincidentally to increase liquor consumption (Weidenaar 1995), it was the electrification of sound recording and reproduction in the mid-1920s that permanently changed the soundscape via the loudspeaker. The city of New York's noise

Today much has changed on both fronts. Background music gave way to foreground music with greater specialisation of the choice of music to fit the environment, and, starting in the late 1970s, the cassette-based Walkman, followed by the portable CD player called the Discman, and then today's iPod digital files, progressively gave the individual listener greater choice of sonic material in everyday surroundings. Whereas background and foreground music could be said to impose themselves on a soundscape, and thereby raise issues of public versus private space, the portable accompaniment medium of the iPod might better be described as a voluntary embedding of one soundscape within another, with the listener controlling not only the material but the degree to which it mixes with the surrounding environment. Michael Bull (2000, 2006, 2007) refers to this embedding as creating an 'acoustic bubble' for the listener, and has extensively documented the functional uses reported by his informants. Many advertisements as well as personal testimonials refer to this practice as creating a 'soundtrack' for everyday life, implying perhaps that the listener views the daily environment as a kind of film for which one is a somewhat detached spectator.

There are some fairly superficial comparisons one can make between the iPod user and the soundscape composer. Both can download tracks or files for their personal use, both can sequence or shuffle their materials, and both can adjust levels and perhaps apply

