

World Wide Soundscapes: Listening to the Local

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the Podcasting phenomenon as a “bubble” of communication space that has emerged in the electronic domain, allowing individuals to share local, varied, information rich soundscapes. Here, stillness characterizes both the listener, who must pay close attention in order to hear, and the acoustic space, which is free of the globalized noise produced by commercial media. In *The Tuning of the World* (1977), R. Murray Schafer describes noise as “sounds we have learned to ignore,” and he proposes the soundwalk as an exercise designed to increase our sensitivity to local sounds and our appreciation of the soundscape, a term that he coined. Using examples that include *The Soundscape Collection*, *Modulation*, and *The Ear Shots Collective Podcast*, I discuss how Podcasts can serve as electronic soundscapes, providing listeners with an intimate sense of another place through the medium of sound. The ability to download episodes on personal, mobile devices allows individuals to hear them at a time and in a place that assures attentive, reflective listening. I suggest that these compositions fit Barry Truax’s description of unique, “hi-fi soundscapes” that are “richly interpreted by locals who understand their contextual meanings” (2000). I also argue that, although podcasting developed out of a desire for individuals to share personal, local sounds, the practice is threatened by what Todd Gitlin describes as “the torrent of images and sounds” from the mass media that “overwhelms our lives” (2001).

Keywords

Soundscape, Acoustic Ecology, podcasting, portable audio

Introduction

In his *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, Barry Truax defines “sound” as “[a]ny vibration in the air or other medium, some types of which are able to cause a sensation of hearing,” and “silence” as “[t]he absence of sound” (Truax 1999). In this context, stillness would result in complete silence. However, as John Cage discovered during a visit to an anechoic chamber in 1951, it is impossible to experience the total absence of sound. In the supposedly “silent” room, Cage reports hearing the sounds that were made by his nervous system and by his blood circulating. James Pritchett explains that this seminal experience convinced Cage that silence provides an opportunity to appreciate non-intentional sounds and to hear sounds that might not otherwise be noticeable in the world around us (Pritchett 1993, 75). In 1952, Cage created *4’33”*, a composition in which a performer sits at a piano but makes absolutely no sound. The piece invites listeners to pay attention to the ambient sounds of the performance hall and to whatever sounds can be heard from outside. Increasing our awareness and appreciation of the acoustic environment is also a central concern of R. Murray Schafer, a well-known Canadian composer who coined the term “soundscape” in his influential book, *The Tuning of the World*, which was first published in 1977. He defines a “soundscape” as “any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field of study,” which includes actual environments and “abstract constructions such as musical compositions” (1977, 274). Schafer has done much to encourage the development of the emerging field of Acoustic Ecology, which he defines as “the study of sounds in relationship to life and society” (1977, 205). He believes that an enhanced sensitivity to, and appreciation of, our acoustic environment is a crucial prerequisite for our ability to engage in acoustic design. As he explains:

[t]he soundscape of the world is a huge musical composition, unfolding around us ceaselessly. We are simultaneously its audience, its performers and its composers. Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply? When we know this, the boring or destructive sounds will become conspicuous enough and we will know why we must eliminate them (Schafer 1977, 205).

Schafer promotes the use of soundwalks to increase our understanding and appreciation of soundscapes and to develop an ability to discriminate between desirable and undesirable sounds. He describes a soundwalk as an exploration of a specific sound environment with the help of a map that serves as a guide, pointing out unusual sounds and suggesting ear-training exercises (1977, 213).

The increasing use of inexpensive digital audio recording devices and the ability to share recordings over the Internet has made it possible for anyone with a minimum of equipment to create and distribute virtual soundwalks. Over the last few years, podcasts have provided another means by which individuals can document and publish their local soundscapes. Andrew Dags and John Hedtke explain that the term “podcasting” is derived from “iPod,” Apple’s popular portable media player, and “broadcasting,” and that it refers to the practice of automatically downloading audio files in MP3 format from the Internet so that they can be listened to on a computer, as well as on cell phones and other MP3-capable portable players, when and where an individual chooses. They acknowledge that image, text, and video files can also be distributed in this way, but that audio is the most common format. Podcasting offers an attractive alternative to broadcast media, they argue, because podcasts are free and it is “two-way street:” individuals can easily create and publish their own content (Dags and Hedtke 2006, 3-4). By 2005, it had become a popular grass roots medium, and Peter Lewis, writing in *Fortune Magazine*, described podcasting as “a rebellion against the blandness of commercial radio,” and “a celebration of the Internet’s power to let individuals offer their own voices to a global audience” (Lewis 2005).

Hi-Fi and Lo-Fi Soundscapes

In his book, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (2001), Todd Gitlin argues that our everyday world is “soundtracked” by institutions that use sound to brand space and to “orchestrate a collective mood” (60). He describes how customized music of the type pioneered by the Muzak Corporation is piped into stores and public spaces, and mood elevating pop tunes are “storecast” into niche retail environments (62). Radio and television similarly use sound and music to communicate a sense of urgency and reliability. The result, he says, is a global “wraparound sound” that accompanies consumer culture the world over (63). Although Gitlin points out that some try to escape this “institutional auditory control,” by selecting a different commercial soundtrack to play on a personal walkman or discman, he believes that this does little more than mask the more intrusive urban noises (64). Barry Truax would categorize these commercial, global soundtracks as “lo-fi.” He argues that lo-fi soundscapes are “uniform and about the same everywhere,” and are “created by the hegemony of only the most powerful sounds.” They are detrimental to both the soundscape and the individual, he explains, because they displace or mask local sounds, and they encourage a habit of non-listening. Hi-fi soundscapes, according to Truax, result from local conditions, are “information rich,” and are “richly interpreted by locals who understand their contextual meanings”. By creating hi-fi soundtracks, he believes that soundscape composers can help to re-integrate the listener with his or her environment in a “balanced ecological relationship” (Truax 2000).

Favorite Sounds and Soundseeing Tours

Although few podcasts consist of professional soundscape compositions, many are used to distribute local sound recordings. The website for the *Earshots Collective Podcast* describes this effort as a “world community project” that is about “sharing the sounds of life,” such as overheard conversations, a bird call, or urban street sounds (*Earshots Collective Podcast* 2007). Listeners are invited to contribute short recordings of found sounds for future podcasts, with a brief description of the location and time. The episodes document a variety of common sound events: a leaf blower, an overheard telephone conversation, a stream near the Rocky Mountains, kids playing in a water fountain, and a checkout clerk telling a customer to “have a great day”. Schafer points out that “noise” is a subjective term that is used to describe “sounds we have learned to ignore,” and

“unwanted sound” (1977, 4, 182-83). The fact that contributors to the *Earshots Collective Podcast* have chosen to share ordinary, everyday sounds that some would classify as noise indicates that sounds can be valued for their associations as much as for their acoustic qualities.

Many podcasts are personal audio journals that include music, comments on current events, and entertainment reviews, as well as recordings of the local sound environment. Ted Riecken’s *Island Podcasting* includes all of these elements. His half hour programmes feature what he calls “soundseeing” tours. These are live, narrated recordings of significant places and events, as well as more common sounds that he records as he goes about his daily activities in Victoria, on Canada’s West Coast. In more than 70 episodes, which have been published over two years, he documents the sound of ferries in Victoria’s inner harbour, bagpipes at a Highland Games, and street music performed at the Luminara Lantern Festival. More prosaic recordings include the sound of birds in his back yard as he cleans a small pond and the sound of a new horn that he installs in his Smart Car (Riecken 2007). He notes that many podcasters record their programmes outside, allowing listeners to hear other voices, birds, or the sound of crunching snow and ice as the narrator walks and talks. As a result, these amateur audio journals provide their listeners with a guided tour of local and very specific sound environments. Riecken, like most podcasters, uses inexpensive recording equipment and does minimal editing, so his podcasts do not exhibit the professional audio quality that we have come to expect from traditional broadcast media and commercial entertainment. However, these information rich, personal tours would qualify as “hi-fi” recordings as Truax defines the term. Unlike commercial studio recordings with high production values, these podcasts provide a more direct experience of real sounds from real events and places.

Soundscape Documentaries and Compositions

Some podcasters are active participants in the Acoustic Ecology movement. They use their programme to share soundscape recordings, and they post relevant information on their website. Lorenz Schwarz created his *Soundscape Collection* podcast to share soundscapes that he encounters in his daily life in Basel, Switzerland. Since the focus is on the acoustic environments that he documents in these short, high quality episodes, his audio comments are limited to information about when and where each was made. He records the sound of a park on a sunny afternoon, a tram ride, insects on a blooming berry bush, and the chiming of church bells. He recommends that listeners use headphones and pay close attention to the wide variety of sounds in these environments. In one episode, he presents recordings of three different urban spaces and asks the listener to guess where they are, before revealing that they are a supermarket checkout, a bank lobby, and a car wash. His objective is to encourage listeners to develop a greater sensitivity to their own local soundscapes through more attentive listening, and to increase their appreciation of the relationship between sounds and different environments. While recording the sound of children playing in his backyard one evening, a rainstorm approaches, thunder is heard rumbling overhead, and heavy rain falls. A few weeks later, he records a similar weather event while visiting a friend at a farm in the middle of an extensive flat plain, and he invites listeners to hear how different the storm sounds in this rural landscape. A note that accompanies the podcast provides the following description:

I’m standing near an old Italian farm house listening to a thunder storm. Raindrops are falling on the plants nearby and on my head and shoulders. The landlord is talking to a tenant and feeding his dog. You can hear the openness of the area (Schwarz 2007).

Scapecast is another effort to publish high quality local soundscape recordings. Created by a sound engineer living in Manchester, the first few episodes of this recent podcast features the sound of a concrete pump at a building site and a recording of a tram near a busy street. “I like the way that the birds and wildlife cut through the distant rumble of traffic, become lost as the trams pass, reappearing with the calm that follows” comments the producer, who identifies himself only as Jon

(*Scapecast* 2007). His web site includes information about recording equipment and techniques and links to other individuals and organizations with an interest in audio production and Acoustic Ecology. He explains that he decided to make and to share these recordings in order to improve his ability to recognize and appreciate everyday sounds and to encourage discussion and debate about the Manchester soundscape. “Living in Manchester, at first, gave me no inspiration with its large industrial soundscape,” he writes, “but thinking of how this represents ‘Manchester’ and its development, regeneration and everyday social life and activities, I decided to begin an exploration into the acoustic makeup of the city and how this transforms as we move to lesser populated suburbs and the vast countryside surrounding the county” (*About Scapecast* 2007).

As a sound engineer, Jon reports that he could not resist publishing a version of a tram recording that he manipulated using a Pro Tools filter. The altered file maintains the duration and relative volume of the major sounds, while smoothing out the fine detail. The result is something closer to a memory or dream of an event, rather than a faithful reproduction. Other podcasters use sounds recorded from their local environment as starting points for musical explorations. *Modulation* is a podcast of soundscape compositions by Tomoyuki Sugimoto that are inspired by, and derived from, everyday sounds from Japan. These include the sound of buzzing insects, radio sports broadcasts, Kyoto Station, ringing telephones, and human and synthesized voices (Sugimoto 2007). By creating something musical from common sounds that form part his acoustic backdrop, he heightens our awareness of these sounds, and he invites us to consider how his local soundscapes compare with similar ones that we have experienced.

Schafer comments that, although the electric revolution enabled us to record, store, transmit, and reproduce sounds, these processes also split sounds from their original context, resulting in what he refers to as “schizophonia” (1977, 88). We might expect the digital manipulation of recorded sounds to increase this sense of disorientation and to separate us further from the acoustic environments that we wish to understand, to appreciate, and, hopefully, to improve. However, many leaders in the Acoustic Ecology movement are practitioners of the art of soundscape composition, and, although the electroacoustic works that they create often include synthesized sounds and the digital editing and reshaping of recorded sounds, their aim is to enhance the listener’s awareness and appreciation of environmental sounds in specific contexts. Hildegard Westerkamp explains that soundscape compositions are “*always* rooted in themes of the sound environment” and are never abstract (1999). The relationship between unprocessed and processed sounds should always inform the listener and the composer about place, time, and situation:

In the face of wide-spread commercial media and leased music corporations, who strategically try to use the schizophrenic medium to transport potential customers into a state of aural *unawareness* and *unconscious* behaviour and ultimately into the act of spending money—in the face of such forces the soundscape composition can and should perhaps create a strong oppositional place of *conscious* listening. Rather than lulling us into false comfort, it can make use of the schizophrenic medium to awaken our curiosity and to create a desire for deeper knowledge and information about our own as well as other places and cultures. It is a forum for us as composers to ‘speak back’ to problematic ‘voices’ in the soundscape, to deepen our relationship to positive forces in our surroundings or to comment on many other aspects of a society (Westerkamp 1999).

Speaking Back

Gitlin describes the torrent of sound that demands our attention as a seamless collage of stories, commentary, sound bites, and increasingly short fragments of ads and musical soundtracks (2001, 7, 96), and he points out that it is easier to avoid seeing something than it is to choose not to hear (2001, 60). Although we may not be able to escape the torrent, a two-way medium allows us to “speak back” in a way that helps us to reclaim our voice and to regain a measure of control over our

sonic environment. One creative approach is to capture the torrent, rob it of its narrative power, and send it back out. Christopher Ariza's *The Babelcast* is a computer-generated podcast that he creates from audio samples of political leaders and commentators from the U.S. and around the world. These sounds are harvested from the electronic media every week or so and are mixed with dynamic noise textures to create an "ambient soundscape" that offers "a unique musical perspective on mass media, language, and current events" (Ariza 2007). Although the sampled segments are long enough for us to understand what is being said, they have been decontextualized, juxtaposed, and layered in such a way as to strip them of any political meaning. In these regular, five-minute episodes, powerful voices have been fragmented and rendered harmless in the creation of sonic poems.

The producer of the *1st Silent Podcast* follows a very different tactic, by providing an acoustic pause and "an opportunity for reflection" (*Silentpodcast* 2007). The 28 completely silent episodes that have been published since July 2005 invite listeners to consider familiar sounds that are evoked only through their titles and brief descriptions. One minute of "Silent Ringtones," two minutes of silence "recorded at Las Vegas," and three minutes and 14 seconds of information "presented live" from a sales conference suggest noisy acoustic events. More natural soundscapes are invoked by two minutes of "quiet silence from the mountains of Utah," ten minutes and 4 seconds "recorded live at the great rainstorm of '06," and 5 minutes and 8 seconds recorded "in a Tuscan Vineyard." However, all of the sound has been removed from these experiences, leaving nothing but their duration intact. One episode, which lasts for exactly four minutes and 33 seconds, is intended to honour John Cage's famous silent composition, *4'33"*. James Pritchett suggests that, by creating a piece that has structure but no content, *4'33"* has a personal, spiritual purpose. Its literal silence, he argues, "reflects the silence of the will necessary to open up a realm of infinite possibilities" (1993, 60). He also points out that, four years before creating *4'33"*, Cage expressed a desire to produce a piece consisting of four and a half minutes of uninterrupted silence for the Muzak Company. It was intended to serve as a kind of "silent Prayer" that would provide temporary relief from the canned music that was piped into retail stores and other interior spaces (1993, 59). By allowing individual listeners to take a break from their noisy playlists, the *1st Silent Podcast* seems to have a similar objective. The absence of intentional sound encourages the listener to take a break from continuous, commercial music and to pay attention to the ambient acoustic environment beyond the headphones.

As podcasting becomes a mainstream medium, the avalanche of commercial and institutional podcasts will make it harder for individuals to find the independent episodes that promote conscious listening, that make a positive contribution to our sonic environment, and that encourage us to take responsibility for improving the soundscapes that surround us. However, the popularity of two-way media is unlikely to diminish. Hopefully, the creative podcasts that are currently available will attract more listeners who have an interest in their acoustic surroundings, and they will inspire other community-minded podcasters to join in on the conversation.

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Biographical Notes

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