

Recording the Hepworth: an acousmatic experience beyond the soundscape.

Some definitions. The acousmatic is a listening stance that favours sound over sight. It enables the listener to take an active role in sharing music but asks that they eschew listening for source and cause. The soundscape normally means the natural soundscape but in terms of soundscape composition, there are clearly modifications made as the composer has intervened. Finally, you may hear the word electroacoustic. This is perhaps the most common term used for a kind of composition that involves electronic means, delivery via loudspeakers and - perhaps most importantly - an avoidance of well-defined popular styles where, for the most part, sound is treated as a particle that is given metric gradations of duration and pitch.

The sound recordist captures sound. Their intervention, even at the earliest of stages is not necessarily 'creative' but their choice of day, place and time will naturally have only the sounds of that day, place and time. The sound recordist may capture something specific or, as in my case, they are there to capture something of everything – whatever is taking place. By contrast there *are* times when recording to a strict agenda is vital. If a sound or soundscape were about to disappear, the forensic capture of said sound might be of great importance. Or it might be that scientific measurements of noise are required. My short project had no such intentions.

I arrived on a hot February day (and this is potentially audible in the sense of a more relaxed space, and the one or two voices heard in the recordings). I recorded from my car in the car park; I walked to the boundaries of the gallery to the river and to the roads; I recorded the destruction of previous foundations making way for the garden, and I recorded the interior of the gallery.

The sound inside the gallery is very much a 'gallery sound'. Ground floor, canned music and a boisterous café. Inappropriate for recording for many reasons (copyright and canned music - an artistic decision not to re-record recorded music, - easier and cheaper all round).

The art spaces proper - the sound of vastness, the murmur of voices - a strange reverberation and ambient noise that instructs us to observe, reflect, take in, learn, understand, and feel. The concrete walls and high ceilings lead to a very long and drawn-out reverberation time and, for me, this set up a series of dream-like spaces that encouraged a certain otherworldliness. Yet, the sculptures afford movement, a certain sense of embodiment and feel much closer to the acousmatic experience as the viewer turns in the space, views the object from different angles and appreciates the environment. There were times when I was drawn towards touching the sculptures, but I could only admire from a distance. The soundscape inside is distant and ethereal. It allowed me to create a personal space.

Outside it's almost impossible to get away from the traffic...and before you ask, I didn't make it up to Wakefield at 3am to sample the nightlife.

I tried to sample the sounds of the Calder. From the periphery of the gallery, the river - with its fast flowing water tends towards white noise. This did, in places act as a natural 'mask' for the mechanical noises of cars. It is interesting to note that most of us *are* happy to accept this full frequency spectrum sound because of its sense of flow, its visual beauty and natural origins. I also tried to record underwater (to the amusement of many watching me dangle hydrophones over the bridge) but it's not at all what one might expect (and indeed what you hear as water early on in this documentary piece is from my February recordings but is a carefully manipulated 'fake' with some pitch change and layering).

I did not take the time to explore more widely and indeed the sounds of nearby Wakefield did not make themselves audible as I moved around the site. However, once outside, the pneumatic drills and large motorised units made for an interesting percussion section. Clearly, one that staff here may well by now remember

unfavourably but one that was a necessary evil, and only lasted for the duration of the build (and is presumably long finished).

Percussion drills hammered the concrete foundations of what stood before on site. When they stopped the reverberant space opened up like a breath of fresh air. It was almost like the outside space was breathing. Strong sounds were reflecting off the buildings the garden now divides (and this may be a feature to treasure).

Initial sounds were therefore catalogued as 'traffic', 'interior', 'drill' and 'Calder'. In my regular composition process, recorded natural sounds would tend towards Foley in that I would disregard information about space, place and time. Quite often I would aim for a very close recording to capture sounds 'without context'. This often meant bringing materials into the studio. For large drills this is impossible. I might use a shotgun mic. Remembering back to our definition of the acousmatic, the drill would become a starting point of something percussive. A quick impulse of energy, full-frequency 'hits' and a sudden release. However, as mentioned before, I was interested in the drill but equally the 30 seconds of sound either side...the soundscape.

Composer Barry Truax articulates the importance of context in recorded sounds when he defines soundscape composition. He writes,

The essential difference between an electroacoustic composition that uses pre-recorded environmental sound as its source material, and a work that can be called a soundscape composition, is that in the former, the sound loses all or most of its environmental context.In soundscape composition, on the other hand, it is precisely the environmental context that is preserved, enhanced and exploited by the composer. ... Part of the composer's intent may also be to enhance the listener's awareness of environmental sound. ..the successful soundscape composition has the effect of changing the listener's awareness and attitudes towards the soundscape and thereby changing the listener's relationship to it. The aim of the composition is therefore social and political, as well as artistic. (Truax, p207)

Truax, B. (2001). *Acoustic communication*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

My composition *Recording the Hepworth: an acousmatic experience beyond the soundscape* aspires not to social or political change but logs my recording experience in February, and my revisits to these sounds and manipulations thereof during the course of the composition process. I tried to register my delight of finding myself in and around the gallery on a day when there was so much sound to engage with. However, I hold no hopes of enhancing a listener's awareness of environmental sound. My composition is merely a 'sonic postcard' and aspires to take the listener on a journey. This journey is neither nostalgic nor negative in any way (especially about the heavy machinery) - I hope to have embraced the *noises* of the space.

So, to the method. Leaving aside the process of stringing together sounds in a collage that has a specific duration, I first transfer sounds from the portable recorder to my laptop and edit larger recordings to suitable durations for framing in time or developing using sound design effects. I tried to be as stationary as possible when recording sounds. However, there were times when I panned around the scene and walked towards an object (you can hear sections where I'm clearly moving, but I quite like the fact that I'm registering my physical presence at the scene). I did not verbalise my process during the recording, nor is there any voice-over.

It is fascinating to consider that the simple task of listening on headphones whilst recording is one level of removal from the 'real world' of sound, and one level into the creative search for recordable materials. For the first time in my work I decided to record at the highest quality (for those scientifically minded, the digital recordings, manipulations and mix - the whole work including this playback - has remained at 96,000hz sample rate, and 24bit resolution). In theory this means I have recorded sounds well above the nominal hearing range (the highest

frequency of which is 20,000hz: You need at least two samples to capture a specific frequency. Therefore CD quality is 44100hz, 16bit resolution). The irony of course is, at my age, having worked with loud sounds for over 25 years, let's say my hearing isn't what it used to be! But we are all going to hear this differently.

With Truax's warnings about soundscape composition in mind, there are some very simple but effective manipulations available to composers (and these are limited by the specific nature of this composition practice where sounds **and** context are important - soundfiles used may be quite long and may not change much over time). Therefore in my opinion the most effective effect is the filter. We probably all know what a filter does: For example, a loss of low frequency, 'lightening' the sound by using a high pass filter; or the loss of high frequencies 'muddying' the sound (the low pass filter), and the resonant filter - colouring a noisy sound with a specific pitch. The gradual implementation of a high-pass filter (losing low rumble) lifts or opens the atmosphere. These are quite emotional effects that are meant to keep the journey moving. And they are often used as time-varying effects (so you can hear gentle glissandi in this piece as a filter's centre frequency rises and falls).

There are also a number of conceptual effects used within this piece. One of these is the process of convolution. This is the spectral multiplication of two sounds. Where there are similar internal frequencies, they remain and combine (not mix, but fuse). Where there is dissimilarity, these frequencies are similarly multiplied but you get out less than you put in. Convolution is therefore a fusion and I made sounds that fused the inside and outside of the gallery. Many, if not all the sounds recorded were spectrally rich so finding and highlighting pitch *or* colouring to create pitch seemed appropriate. The addition of coloured noise-based sounds normally gives the sound a firmer root and a more settled, relaxed feel. I found pitches in the hum of the machines and after listening repeatedly I found a central drone pitch going on whether the sounds were 'inside' or 'outside'. I used synthesizers to draw attention to these pitches. In places this addition is quite aggressive. In other places it's quite subtle. It is certainly something I have never done in my previous compositions. You may come away feeling the whole piece has one or two underlying drones. As I've said, I can't seem to help but hear a resonant pitch in all the recorded spaces.

After recording and manipulation, I ended up with 2.48Gb of sound. Many were used exactly as recorded; some were one degree of separation from the real; some were so manipulated as to become quite synthetic and unrecognizable. The mix is clearly linked to and affected by the recorded sounds and their manipulations and is perhaps the most confusing part of 'the language of electroacoustic music'. It is where the personality of the composer begins to appear and their journey really gets going. There is plenty of scope for research into this particular aspect of composition. Composers are extremely loathe to talk about how they actually make their work. Suffice it to say, it was good to have a deadline for this piece!

To conclude: Remember the acousmatic - the pure listening experience without noting source or cause. This is clearly impossible and not required here. I want you to know these are the sounds of the Hepworth in February as the primary work on the foundations took place to make way for the garden. I also want you to relocate yourself from this room to any space that isn't here; your own personal listening space where you necessarily 'see' your own personal soundscape. Such that, when you walk through the galleries and step outside, you might appreciate the real soundscape more audibly than before.