



Learning is Living

Acoustic Ecology as Pedagogical Ground A Report on Experience

by Lena Dietze

Translated from the German by Norbert Ruebsaat

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“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 (Gymnasia). 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 Heiler

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 marketplace.

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



Jürgen Heller

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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English translation © January 2000, Norbert Ruebsaat.

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.



Jürgen Heller