Soundwalking

by Hildegard West

The following text is an excerpt from "Soundwalking," an article originally published in the now out-of-print Sound Heritage, Volume III Number 4, *Victoria, B.C. 1974, revised in 2001.*

We hear about wind voices in old myths, in novels, in poetry, in fairytales and in horror stories, and we can listen to them in today's films and radio plays.

Whenever wind touches an object it creates a sound—a sound which is unique for this specific acoustic event. Emily Carr perceived these subtleties very well, as we can read in her writings:

> "The trees take the wind so differently. Some snatch at it as if glad of the opportunity to be noisy. Some squeak and groan, and some bow meekly with low murmurs. And there are tall, obstinate ones who scarcely give even a sulky budge." (Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journal of Emily Carr,* Toronto, 1966, p. 128)

And so did Thomas Hardy:

> "To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of a breeze the fir trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; and beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality." (Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree,* 1920, p. 3)

'king the Wind

:gard Westerkamp

Wind whistling through electric wires. Wind rustling through grass. Wind trapped between buildings. Wind howling, mourning, rustling, wailing, whining, screaming… And as we hear these voices they may be mocking us, they may sound frightening, or they may energize us, each time depending on the situation in which we hear them.

> Go out and listen to as many sounds created by wind as possible. Listen for low-pitched and high-pitched ones, for those which continually change their pitch and also their loudness. What kinds of structures produce what kinds of sounds when touched by wind? What effects do the various kinds of sounds have on you?

If it is fascinating to listen to the acoustic interplay between wind and object it becomes even more exciting to listen to that between wind and other sounds. What happens to an existing sound when it is caught, thrown about and carried away by the wind?

> Concentrate on one outstanding continuous sound (church bells, a motorboat, outdoor music etc.) and listen to the acoustic games the wind plays with it.

In the twentieth century we have developed extremely fast-moving vehicles and, as a by-product, have created a new type of wind. As we speed along a freeway we encounter a voice of the wind which has never been heard before.

> Listen to this voice and compare it to all those voices of the wind you have heard so far. Is there a significant difference between them?

People have always listened to wind and have been fascinated by it. Because they know what kinds of sounds it can create they have invented and designed objects—like wind-chimes and wind-harps for example—that make the most beautiful music when they are touched by the wind.

> Build an object with which the wind can play the most exciting acoustical games. Listen to the music it can make and observe other people's reaction to it. You may possibly have improved the quality of your acoustic environment.

Photography by Hildegard Westerkamp

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