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JORDAN LACEY is a PhD candidate and Soundscape Studies teacher at SIAL Sound Studios in the School of Architecture & Design at RMIT University, researching Acoustic Ecology and Urban Soundscape Studies. He has completed a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Applied Science and the History & Philosophy of Science, and has received a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education. He worked as a teacher in Australia and the UK for ten years. Jordan is a practicing sound artist and musician. He is currently engaged in the creation of sonic philosophies and soundscape compositions in a variety of contexts.

Revisiting the Vancouver Soundscape Tape Collection: Motives, Intentions, & Practice

By Vincent Andrisani

This article features accompanying sound files, available online at: http://www.akouse.gr/soundscape_journal_Vol11/andrisani.html

During the early 1970s, a team of researchers at Simon Fraser University began documenting soundscapes throughout Vancouver. These recordings eventually became a significant part of *The Vancouver Soundscape* (World Soundscape Project, 1978), which was at the time, the most comprehensive sonic analysis of an urban environment anywhere in the world. Just over twenty years later, during the mid 1990s, the project was revisited for the first time, where the motive of the endeavor remained similar to that of the 1970s: the documentation of "typical" Vancouver sound signals, soundmarks, and soundscapes.

Beginning in the summer of 2010, and following the lead of both the original group and 1990s recordist Robert MacNevin, I too had the opportunity to contribute to the legacy of The Vancouver Soundscape as the project's most recent recordist. Inevitably, this endeavour once again lent itself to a longitudinal analysis, marking the third revisit to the tape collection, separated by more-or-less twenty-year increments. Yet, unlike the others that preceded me, I had the opportunity and the fortune of assessing the first two attempts, and

in turn of developing an approach that simultaneously upheld the motives and intentions of the initial group, while addressing my own research interests as well. In what follows, I will explore some of the decisions behind the recording process conducted during the summer and autumn of 2010.

Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to mention that all of the recordings have been captured with a Marantz solid-state recorder, using an Audio-Technica stereo condenser microphone. Not only have these recordings been archived according to time and date, but corresponding log sheets have also been completed in order to communicate both the SPL measurements, and the specific acoustic attributes of the recordings (i.e. particular sounds, and the times at which they occur). Photographs are used as visual representations to supplement the audio, and as such, I have captured several at each recording site. And finally, embedded within the metadata of each photograph are GPS coordinates, which will allow future recordists to trace my exact location at the time of recording.

Vancouver Festival Soundscapes

The entry point for much of my scholarly work concerns the contextual contingency of the practices of soundmaking and listening. With this in mind, I continue to ask, how might sound be employed as a medium through which we can conduct a significant social and cultural inquiry?

The efforts of the Vancouver Soundscape Project have in large part been born out of such a notion, and so in this vast archive of literature and sound, there are invaluable tools through which to construct such an analysis. Not only do the LP and booklet produced in the 1970s offer a thorough evaluation of Vancouver's sonic attributes, but they simultaneously offer a methodological, theoretical, and discursive approach that can be applied to almost any urban sound environment. The project's tape collection, which is perhaps the most meticulously organized part of the archive, functions as an acoustic placemaker, one that offers an aural glimpse into the socio-cultural activity, and defines a very particular set of circumstances in time and space. It is this hands-on portion of the project that was revisited once in the 1990s, and in so doing, the focus largely remained upon the sounds of "the everyday." There is, however, more to the Vancouver soundscape than its everyday sound signals and soundmarks.

In contrast to the more common themes that emerge within Vancouver's soundscape, an untapped site of socio-cultural activity worthy of the project's attention is the festival.¹ The festival, or the event, represents a unique opportunity to sample social processes and activity that are specific to local culture. Typically, they are communal gatherings in which citizens congregate in a public space and engage in a shared activity as participants, audience members, or some combination of both. Festivals draw people together from different socio-economic backgrounds, and disparate geographical areas, in order to make use of infrastructure and social networks, while celebrating an occasion that in many cases possesses some sort of historical significance.

Perhaps what is most apparent about the festival is its ephemeral quality, as it lacks the temporal potentiality that characterizes the day-to-day composition of the soundscape. Like most cities in North America, many of Vancouver's festivals and events, and certainly those that are required to be held outdoors, take place during the summer months. The occasions that are celebrated during this season are countless, and offer a multiplicity of opportunities that are deserving of acoustic documentation. Each one is representative of a different community, and the demographic that is present at each can vary tremendously. As a result, every event possesses its own acoustic character, and the manner in which sound functions in that particular context offers a fleeting, yet an intriguing point of departure for further sociological and anthropological inquiry.

In addition to the ephemerality of the festival, such events also articulate significant ties to place. Festivals are so often relied upon at the municipal level as a means of promoting and asserting the city's character and cultural identity. Indeed, there is an economy that surrounds and dictates the nature of the contemporary cultural event, and by extension, there is an inevitable commercial and touristic quality to the promotion and the experience of such occasions. However, in each of my samples, there is at the very least, a particular community within the local culture for whom the event is meaningful. And so, in much the same way as a soundmark, the sound events



Pride Parade 2010

of a festival are also a site-specific articulation of local culture, which functions as an assertion, and in some cases even a reclamation, of the physical terrain.

The first stage of the current revisit to the Vancouver Soundscape Project focused largely upon the documentation of summer festivals and events, which ranged from the Pride Parade to the Canada Day celebrations at the downtown Convention Centre. Concerning the events that I have documented, the two most significant contributors to the soundscape on most if not all such occasions are the voice and music making.

Whether it is a Master of Ceremony (MC) speaking from a stage through a public address system, or the chatter amongst participants and festival goers, the presence of the voice at many festival events can at times be ubiquitous. And the manner in which it functions, is telling of the social and cultural dynamics that are present at that moment. For instance, the amplified voice likely implies a single person talking to many, which is indicative of a performer/audience relationship. Or, we might pay attention to the language being spoken, which is suggestive of a particular ethnic community with which an event is associated (for instance, the Chinatown Night Markets). And finally, the sounds of unamplified, omnipresent voices are often associated with high concentrations of people, found in audiences, large crowds, or at street festivals.

In addition to the voice, musical soundmaking has long been a significant part of festival celebrations. While the type of music being played remains specific to each event, the manner in which it is introduced into the soundscape is also telling of the social relationships that are being performed on that occasion. For instance, beyond the musical genre in and of itself, we might ask: is the music being performed live for a listening audience, or is the act of music making communal and participatory? Or perhaps, the act of musical soundmaking is not engaged at all, and the festival's source of music is electroacoustically reproduced. Not only do the answers to these questions begin to address the manner in which sound functions on that particular occasion, but in so doing, they also have the capacity to offer a rich description of music as a form of cultural production as well as the social dynamics that surround it.

The Sociology of the Musical Performance

The Canada Day celebrations that took place on the evening of July 1st, 2010 at the Convention Centre, for example, offered an exceptional scenario of communal music making ("Fireworks at Jack Poole Plaza", 2010). Interestingly enough, the "official" singing

¹ It is interesting to note that most, if not all of the festivals that have been documented in this iteration of the project did not exist at the time of the original project's recording (that is, in the 1970s). Vancouver's changing socio-cultural demographics have contributed in part to an evolving funding structure in the cultural sector, and so many of the city's current festivals and events did not emerge until the late 1970s or 1980s.



Celebration of Lights Fireworks Presentation 2010

of the national anthem that occurred during the day (at 12 o'clock noon, following the "O Canada" horn) was sparsely participated in ("Canada Place on Canada Day", 2010). However, the spontaneous (and in some cases drunken) rendition of "O Canada" that was sung during the evening celebrations was participated in by hundreds, if not thousands of people. The impromptu, a cappella national anthem quickly defined the character of the soundscape surrounding both the Convention Centre and Canada Place, and was indeed the highlight of a recording in which I was attempting to merely capture the fireworks celebration.

This serendipitous encounter can be read and evaluated from numerous vantage points, one of which might be the self-evident patriotic appeal that is enacted by the singing of the national anthem. Given the spirit of the occasion, many, if not all of those gathered in Jack Poole Plaza outside the Convention Centre were willing participants in a celebration to honour Canada. As such, the staggering number of voices heard in the recording is not entirely unprecedented, given the size of the event and the amount of people in attendance. However, social behaviour demonstrated a significant variation from midday to the evening, and thus the evening's egalitarian and participatory nature of communal soundmaking could also be read as the reclamation of performance and music making at a point during the festivities that centered upon the spectacle of the fireworks. This previously unannounced, uncoordinated communal performance at the 2010 Canada Day celebrations exemplifies an instance of the participatory, albeit spontaneous, nature of music making at a Vancouver festival.

The recordings at the Coastal Jazz Festival on the other hand, present a typical scenario of the audience/performer relationship

("Gastown Latin Jazz Performance", 2010). The outdoor stage set up on Water St. in Gastown allowed for an audience of several thousand to gather and listen to live jazz music at no cost. The performers were a local ensemble named "Zapato Negro", a Latin-jazz quartet with several members of Cuban origin.

This particular recording articulates the typical soundscape one might expect at a concert: the music dominates the acoustic environment when being performed, and when finished, the audience reciprocates with applause, cheering, and yelling. Part of the dialogue between performer and audience arises out of a performance etiquette that is generally understood by those in attendance. When the performers play, one listens, and when the piece comes to a close, audiences show their appreciation in a manner of their choice. But the other part comes from the dynamics created by the sound system in place for the given event. In the case of the outdoor stage at the Coastal Jazz Festival, the musicians were playing through an amplification system that was loud enough to dominate most any soundscape. The volume of the ensemble through the public address system was such that the music could be heard at quite some distance from the stage. Moreover, in order to speak with the person immediately beside you, you would have to raise the volume of your voice substantially. In this case, we are presented with one of the more apparent and recurring scenarios for the field recordist, which is how to deal with electroacoustically produced sound.

The Electroacoustic Dilemma

Electroacoustic reproduction is a ubiquitous form of soundmaking in both public and private environments that invariably shapes the manner in which we communicate, respond, and listen to sound (Schafer, 1977; Truax, 2001). It has the capacity to reconfigure social relationships that otherwise could not exist (telecommunications being perhaps an obvious example), or by simultaneously subverting those that otherwise would (as evidenced in the attempt at interpersonal communication during the jazz performance in Gastown).

In terms of Vancouver's summer festivals, the reliance upon electroacoustic sound varied for each one, yet, there was no occasion that was without it. From the music at various artist and vendor booths at the street festivals, to the voice of the MC in the performer/audience setting, reproduced sound played an integral role in every festival that was documented. As such, the extent to which electroacoustic sound was part of the overall production of festivals was significant, and it determined how I approached the recording of each occasion.

Prior to recording, I ask: to what extent does such sound dictate the nature of the event, and by extension, to what extent is its recorded presence sufficient without dominating or even becoming oppressive to the remaining soundscape features? The answers to these questions certainly shape my approach, where in most circumstances, I have attempted to survey and capture the entirety of the soundscape with as much attention to the range of sound signals as possible.

Take for instance the amplified musical performance to which I have previously referred. It would be nonsensical as a recordist to assume a position in the front row, and to record within close proximity of the public address system. Whatever audience sounds were captured during the songs themselves (people chatting, yelling, and moving about) would be masked, and the documentation of a balanced soundscape would never be achieved. Similarly, the amplified voice is also a characteristic of the festival soundscape, evidenced on recordings such as the Pride Parade, and the street festivals. During the Pride Parade for example, where the MC's voice dominates the local soundscape, I again maintained a comfortable distance from the loudspeaker, and ensured a position behind the street side viewing audience. This offered the opportunity to

capture many of the details in the soundscape without the overbearing presence of the voice, and as a result, I was able to preserve the sounds of people's voices, footsteps, and miscellaneous activities. Such sounds are as much a part of the event's soundscape as the music or the amplified voice. To capture one at the expense of the other would be to forfeit the recording's capacity to comprehensively articulate the whole of the festival.

The Recording Aesthetic

By discussing the multiplicity of discrete sounds that I endeavour to document and preserve, I effectively suggest that in most cases, there are great benefits to seeking comprehensive documentation. That is to say, in order to achieve the desired notion of balance in a festival setting (or in any setting that seeks documentation that is inclusive), one is on some level required to assess the characteristics and behaviour of sound amongst the physical terrain.

In order to accomplish this, there is a definite 'scouting' period that is undertaken when I arrive at a location. Prior to recording, I aim for a level of familiarity amidst the soundscape, and attempt to cultivate a sense of place within the social context, in order to effect the most beneficial and fruitful choices for the recording itself. This could imply anything from observing the unique acoustic characteristics of a particular social activity, to listening intently to the most banal of soundscapes, ultimately seeking the most opportune moment and spatial position for documentation.

While the choices to be made are endless, and the very notion of a value-neutral and objective recording is non-existent, part of the motive to maintain the breadth of discrete sounds within the soundscape comes as a result of its potential benefit to the listening audience. By choosing to represent the soundscape in this manner, my intent remains to offer the individual that is absent from the event the most inclusive and complete aural description of the proceedings. That is, the manner in which I position myself as a recordist, and the choices that are made in order to frame each recording, are

negotiated and informed by an aesthetic that attempts not only aural preservation, but also a comprehensive listening experience during playback, given the amount of information it can offer the listener about the original experience.

The previous example of monitoring the recording distance from the amplified sound of the stage is perhaps an all-too-obvious instance of determining the recordist's physical positioning in such a location. However, there are scenarios when this relationship is not quite as apparent. Bearing in mind both the fundamentals of acoustics in terms of the behaviour of sound in space, as well as Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter's notion of aural architecture (2007) which emphasizes the social function of soundmaking and the manner in which it "illuminates" the attributes of the physical terrain, the Celebration of Lights fireworks presentation offered the opportunity to explore spatial positioning with a great amount of acuity. This event was documented with two separate stereo microphones and a four-channel output was developed for playback, recreating a more complex and detailed spatial character for the listener than that of a stereo recording alone.

Prior to recording the fireworks display, my colleague Nathan Clarkson and I decided that given the nature of the physical terrain at English Bay, the recording might benefit from situating ourselves on the road in front of a condominium complex at the corner of Beach Ave and Cardero Street. This intersection is mere metres away from the water, and the fireworks themselves were being lit on a barge some ways from the shore. Our decision to record from this location originated first in the idea to try to document the event as it was experienced by the listening audience within our vicinity (in which there were thousands of people). And secondly, we wanted to capture the rich sonic colouration of the space itself which was produced by the acoustic reflections of the fireworks bouncing off the exterior of the condominium. With one microphone directed toward the fireworks, and the other facing the opposite direction – toward the condominium – the recording recreates that soundscape with an incredible amount of intricacy and nuance given its unique spatial characteristics.



Canada Day Festivities at Jack Poole Plaza 2010

Employing a Fixed vs. Moving Spatial Perspective

A large number of festival recordings were accomplished using a *fixed spatial perspective*. That is, where the recordist remains physically anchored for the duration of the recording, “emphasizing smoothly a space/time flow” (Truax, 2002, p. 8). In the case of the festival, this approach is most effective in the documentation of the unique sound event such as a performance, exemplified by the Celebration of Lights recording, or that of the Coastal Jazz Festival. By spatially situating oneself in a fixed position, the listening audience can experience a particular soundscape with a specific focus on the nature and type of sounds themselves, and the manner in which they propagate through physical space.

A *moving spatial perspective* on the other hand, is one where the recordist traverses the physical terrain in order to capture the desired soundscape(s). It is a “journey emphasizing a smoothly connected space/time flow” (Truax, 2002, p. 8), which functions as the most profitable manner of documenting the event with numerous distinct sound environments. For instance, the very design and intention of the street festival lends itself to the moving spatial perspective as a result of the many acoustic environments associated with such an occasion. Such environments are experienced by the recordist, and eventually by the listener, in a manner that emphasizes the notion of the aural narrative created by movement.

The most comprehensive documentation of both the “Hats Off Day” street festival on Hastings Street in Burnaby as well as “Car Free Day” on Main Street in Vancouver were accomplished by soundwalking the length of the designated area. Given the countless number of vendors, street stages, musicians, and activities at each festival, it would be impossible to have experienced the many sound environments from a fixed position. Upon arriving at both street festivals, I spent time surveying the terrain, and estimating the length of the enclosed area. Both festivals spanned a distance that could be walked within ten to fifteen minutes, and so I began at one end, and with the recording device positioned in front of me, walked toward the opposite end. In so doing, the narrative quality of the festival emerged. Each point along the length of the street articulates its own distinct sonic character, and not only is each one comprehensively documented in this way, but also, the points of transition in between unique sound environments emerges according to the movement of the recordist. The acoustic profile of discrete sound events such as musicians, ghetto blasters, MCs coordinating activities, and so on, evidence themselves in the route and the speed of the recordist in such a way that the journey of the street festival is most accurately articulated by movement between distinctive soundscapes.

Conclusion: a Sound Sensibility

Ultimately, just as there is no single, ideal manner to photograph a particular object, there also exists no such manner in which to acoustically document a festival or event. However, the process is riddled with decisions one must make, which challenge the recordist to remain mindful of the conventions that afford desired results. By recording the festival from a balanced, inclusive, and comprehensive perspective, not only does it capture the soundscape in a manner that resembles the original experience for so many of its participants, but it also offers the greatest amount of information about the occasion. This is not to say that a close examination of discrete sounds (or sound objects) is of less value for scholarly inquiry; rather,

that a complete acoustic image of a festival in all of its complexities remains a highly useful resource for articulating the general nature of the event to the greatest amount of people.

Finally, the one remaining facet of the recording process I have yet to address is not so much a decision, or a motive, as it is a sensibility. Field recording is filled with surprises and unexpected situations, and it is up to the recordist to be acutely aware of their context, and simultaneously be prepared to document it. This implies creating and listening closely to a “test” recording, one in which the recordist merely assesses the functionality of the recording device, as well as the recording levels themselves. Similarly, another approach that can produce fruitful results is by beginning recording prior to the event that requires documentation, and also allowing it to extend beyond the required length. The recording captured during the evening celebration for Canada Day demonstrated precisely that, where I began the recording well before the fireworks began. As a result, I happened to document the impromptu singing of “O Canada” in Jack Poole Plaza, which is indeed one of the more memorable moments of all of the 2010 festival recordings. As a field recordist, the motto “keep it running” is indeed one to stand by, and sometimes, the unanticipated, chance event, is the one that contains the most desirable qualities of the given soundscape. It is from this position, and with this in mind, that I approached my contribution to the Vancouver tape collection archive during the summer of 2010.

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VINCENT ANDRISANI is a PhD student in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Currently working in the area of aural culture studies and acoustic communication, he is interested in the ways in which listening contributes to one’s sense of place, belonging, and membership.