

# *Sound Reflections: The influence of acoustic ecology on classroom composition*

By Jonathan Savage and Mike Challis

## **Starting Points**

In the United Kingdom soundscape and acoustic ecology approaches to composition are under-researched and utilised by classroom practitioners. Yet these approaches bridge the gap between the demands of the formal curriculum and the personal values and experiences that pupils bring with them to the classroom. The projects outlined in this paper show that such a creative approach to curriculum planning gives students the opportunity to reflect sonically on physical places, their own and others' environments in powerful and authentic ways, while the innovative use of technologies in the classroom gives all students a voice for these expressions, regardless of 'traditional' musical ability or skill. Furthermore, these projects implement technological and pedagogical strategies that enable "our young people not only to have the opportunity to become soundscape researchers, but [also] soundscape designers" (McGinley 2001, 73).

It was against this backdrop that two innovative projects were completed at Debenham High School, a rural Suffolk comprehensive school of 450 pupils aged between 11 and 16. The pedagogical and compositional dimensions of these projects - *Dunwich Revisited* and *Reflecting Others* - have both been described elsewhere (Savage and Challis 2001a & b). The purpose of this short article is not to revisit these ideas but rather to investigate and comment on the positive influence of acoustic ecology within classroom composition.

## **Project Descriptions • Dunwich Revisited**

Dunwich's eventful and fantastic history has been a rich source of inspiration for composers, poets, artists and choreographers. During the early part of the second millennium it was a major port on the east coast of Suffolk, enjoying considerable wealth and prosperity. But due to a number of environmental changes, Dunwich lost its place as a premier port. Its prosperity declined and the city itself eroded. Over the next few hundred years most of the city was subsumed beneath the sea. Early last century, All Saints Church gradually fell from the top of the cliffs into the sea (see Figure 1).

The project involved the whole of the lower school (approximately 280 pupils) and the Year 10 music group (a group of 15 pupils). Pictures, writings, photographs and other resources were assembled on a large wall display, providing a range of environmental stimuli centred on the theme of Dunwich. A number of pupils had visited Dunwich itself and recounted to the various classes their recollections of it as a place. Other resources included the pupils' own experiences of walking along the Suffolk coast, which has a distinct raw beauty of its own. These environmental stimuli reflected the two states of Dunwich; firstly, the ambience

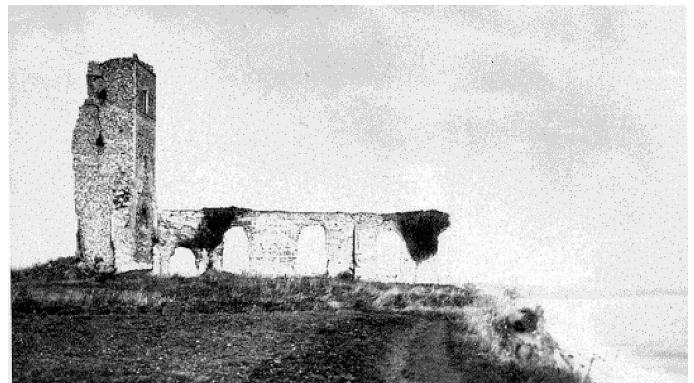


Figure 1: All Saints Church, Dunwich © Dunwich Museum.

Figure 3: Prison corridor through bars.

of the sea, wind and reed beds and, secondly, the occupation of this environment by humankind.

Pupils drew on a number of these materials as they began to express their feelings about Dunwich in musical ideas. In the first lesson, pupils were played Mike Challis' piece *Dunwich*. This piece charts the changing landscape of Dunwich through its ternary structure. Its environmental sounds, including the sound of the sea and the wind whistling in the reed beds, are combined with medieval instruments and dance tunes and paint an evocative picture of the town's gradual evolution and dissolution. Pupils reflected on the music in a number of ways, drawing from it a range of emotional, aesthetic and intellectual experiences relating to their view of Dunwich. They also looked at choreographic notes and illustrations from Pamela Harding-Challis, for whose dance *State of the Sea* the music was written. These notes showed the direct influence of the environment on her work :

"It is about time, change and the relentless pressure of the elements. The sea, Dunwich Heath and the photographic remains of All Saints Church are all sources of inspiration."

Using vocal sounds, instruments and sound processors, the pupils designed 108 musical responses to the environmental stimuli. Sound processors provided a way for pupils to develop, extend and refine a range of sounds throughout the project. Pupils made significant references to the impact of these processors, including a number of comments related to how they used various effect parameters to recreate appropriate atmospheres: "It makes things less plain. When you just sung it all alone it sounded really weird and plain, lifeless really. When you have the echoes it makes it sound eerie and it adds a kind of feeling and a depth to it." (Year 8 girl)

The musical responses were tremendously varied. Many of them used a variety of environmental sounds, such as the sound of a local stream, recorded on a portable minidisc, or peals of church bells faded with sounds of the sea. Other pupils explored the sound of Gregorian chant, picking up on the large number of churches in the town of Dunwich. Using a sound processor with a small amount of reverberation, a group of five Year 8 girls composed the following words, together with a melody and a basic accompaniment, which represented the occupation of the natural environment by humankind:

"A new world is coming and we don't know  
Just where we're going next.

A new world is coming and we don't know  
Just where we're going next.

The old world is gone,  
And never to be found,  
The past is in the past,  
The past is in the past.

Say your prayers and say good-bye,  
Say your prayers and say good-bye,  
Say good-bye."

The wide variety of inspirational material enabled pupils to draw together and cross-reference ideas from diverse sources. Composition functioned as a metaphor for the putting together, organising and layering of ideas from a wide variety of experiences and domains, many of these not directly from the musical field. As a result pupils began to identify with the place very strongly. One Year 10 girl commented that the range of material "gave you a picture in your mind of what Dunwich would have looked like."

A final concert hall piece was then created, based on some of the most popular musical ideas drawn from the work done by individual classes. A number of these ideas clearly made an impact on the pupils, who felt they best represented the place and history of Dunwich as they perceived it. The piece linked the separate musical ideas produced by various groups of pupils together within the overarching ternary structure provided by Mike Challis' original piece. It was performed in the concert hall at Snape Maltings, just a few miles away from Dunwich. For many pupils this was the highlight of the project. Not only were they able to perform in a professional concert venue, but they were able to perform 'their piece' to the assembled audience: "I enjoyed the scale of the place and atmosphere. It was nice to see people enjoying your creation and it made you feel you had achieved something that was worthwhile."

## Reflecting Others

*Reflecting Others* used the actual sounds (and images) of two contrasting environments as raw material. This digital arts project was a collaboration between the school, an arts agency and a high

security unit of young offenders at a local prison. The principal technologies used in the project were digital video and audio software on iMac computers, digital video cameras and minidisc recorders. Fig. 2 illustrates the project's main stages.

At the heart of the *Reflecting Others* project was a process of reflection with digital media. Young people's ability to reflect on their own lives and the lives of others inspired creative responses.

It used sonic and visual material taken from the pupils' and young offenders' actual environments, inspired by reflections on three starting points: self-identity, community and environment. Early project work included getting pupils and young offenders to consider and interpret each of these words in light of their personal experiences. Subsequent work included a range of creative writing tasks designed to get pupils and young offenders to think about each other, their likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams. These narratives and poems were stored on hard disks and then swapped. Pupils and young offenders watched and listened to the material collected by the other group. A number of things became particularly interesting at this point.

Firstly, pupils were clearly shocked by some of the sounds and images from inside a real prison, such as the audio and visual references to bars, gates slamming and keys jangling.

The Year 10 group were very interested in the sonic material. Small things, like the variety of young offenders' accents, were picked out as being of significant interest. The material content of some of the words and phrases was commented on. One prisoner read, with obvious difficulty, a piece of narrative prose that he had written. Year 10 pupils received this with quiet and sombre appreciation.

The audio material collected by the young offenders showed the more resonant acoustics of the prison environment. The constant noise of the air conditioning was a feature. Prisons are seldom quiet during the day but the young offenders commented how eerily quiet the prison is at night.

The young offenders viewed the pupils as "little rich kids." They also found their accents interesting, commenting on how plump they sounded in comparison to their own. Another factor was that the only contact that young offenders have with the opposite sex, apart from family visits, is with female professionals. At first the images of girls from the school were treated as sexual objects in much the same way as the young offenders would regard their posters in their cells. With time, however, and especially after listening to the audio recordings of girls and their lives and environment, the young offenders began to refer to the girls more as people. It was as if the sound made them into real people, due more respect, rather than visual objects to be lusted after.

Pupils' attitudes towards the young offenders also changed during the project. Many began to empathise with them: "By the looks of things it looks worse than I thought 'cos I expected they would be able to go outside and do more normal activities like we do. But they're trapped in there never seeing proper sunlight, trapped between walls, bars, gates and doors, trapped in Hollesley Bay for so many years and never going outside. They're looking at the same things day in, day out for years. I think this is wrong. And one boy's poem about the prison backed this up. No crime deserves to do this to a child." (Year 9 boy)

In some areas there were similar responses from the two groups. Examples of sonic and visual themes explored by both groups included

- sports hall games, including basketball, badminton and squash;
- sounds of the cafeteria or lunch hall;
- weight and fitness rooms;
- recorded CD extracts of popular dance music.

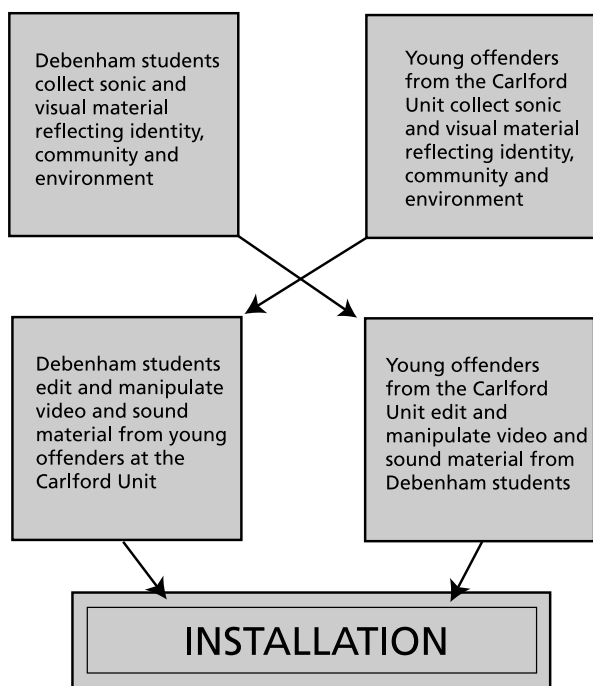


Figure 2: Exchange of Material and Information

However there were stark differences in their respective environments. The young offenders inhabit an internal space, with hardly any view of the outside world in which they are seldom allowed to spend time. The pupils collected a much broader range of environmental material.

These materials were then built up into an installation, with each group creatively editing and manipulating the material of the other environment. The installation consisted of a black box that people could freely walk into. Inside it, there was a video screen and stereo speakers playing a synchronised 24 minute sound and video piece. Two additional speakers played a third and fourth sound track from random CDs consisting of additional recorded material interspersed with long silences. Mirrors were placed within the structure so that the installation could be viewed and heard from many angles, creating a multi-faceted experience. The main sound and video track was made up of several sonic pieces created by the pupils and young offenders and edited together by pupils in the school. The video was then laid onto the sound by a video artist using video clips made by the pupils and young offenders. The installation made quite an impression on all who visited it during its time in school, at the prison and whilst on public display at Snape Maltings Concert Hall during the Aldeburgh Festival and Snape Proms.

Pupils generally enjoyed the project. The evaluation that we carried out showed that much of the work with the various technologies was significantly different from anything that they had done before. It was challenging in a technical sense but allowed them enough personal freedom to make important creative choices about the audio and video material. In the case of the young offenders, the installation was run on an “open day”, the first one to happen at the prison. Inmates and visitors were free to view the work at any time and for as long as they wished. The young offenders repeatedly dragged visitors into the installation to show them what they had created and to try to spot themselves in the video or hear themselves in the sound track. There was a definite sense of ownership of the material and a sense that the whole was better than the sum of its parts.

## Conclusion

Soundscape and acoustic ecology approaches are important to us pedagogically. As we have noticed in our work, the technologies on which they draw can democratise musical practice when used in an appropriate way. But there is another equally vital reason for using these approaches. In these projects we explored a range of technologies that allow environments to be ‘brought inside’ the classroom, to be considered and reflected on and used as a source of musical expression. Whether this is a geographical or social environment, individual or collaborative reflections can lead to an increasing sense of environmental awareness. In *Reflecting Others*, pupils and young offenders were clearly moved in their understanding of the other group as they worked throughout the project. This came about through their sharing of each other’s environments and communities and their respective views of each other’s identities. While there was no actual discussion (verbal or written) between the two groups, just the sharing of carefully chosen sound and images was enough for each group to comprehend and appreciate the other in a deeper and more meaningful way. In other words, “Music is the pretext – life is the text” (Kushner, 1999).

To sum up, there is a need to redefine models of classroom composition for the 21st century and transform them within the digital age. New technologies will not do this on their own. Creative approaches to composition are vital. These projects clearly show that acoustic ecology provides one such approach. And, most importantly, it can be used to build a model of classroom composition that engages our pupils in a richer and more meaningful way with life itself.

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