

## **Soundwalking and improvisation**

Dr. Andra McCartney

Concordia University

May 2010

Proponents of soundwalks have sometimes referred to the improvisational listening that is required in order to work with differing weather patterns, seasonal and other changes in the soundscape, as well as to shape the path of the soundwalker through the soundscape based on responses to auditory clues (see for instance McCartney 2005; Westerkamp 2006). However, public soundwalks are frequently conceptualized and planned in advance, with routes and activities laid out and adhered to by participants as a kind of score, circumscribing direct listening engagement with the soundscape. Similarly, audio walks, prepared headphone soundwalks and listening guides provide pre-conceived experiences for the audience. While listeners have been asked by soundscape researchers to think of the soundscape as a musical composition, what happens if we think of listening to the sound environment as an improvisational activity rather than as a composition? Does this not make more sense since the sound environment is never a fixed entity, never completely scoreable? Listening improvisationally makes particular sense for the mobile context of soundwalks, in which the motions of the soundwalkers create possibilities for changes of perspective through the space. In this article I wish to consider the various ways that soundwalking can benefit from improvisational thinking and practices during listening, framing of soundwalks, field recording, playing with recordings excerpted from soundwalks, playing with elements of soundwalks in improvisational movement, and inviting improvising musicians to create soundwalks.

### Listening and framing

A soundwalk provides an opportunity to create a route through a place focused on listening. Soundwalks form a bridge between the everyday experience of walking and mindful, creative listening, framing what could be an everyday activity and giving this experience the potential for listening and thinking about sound in the environment. Whether walking alone or in a group, the soundwalker defines the beginning of a walk by a conscious decision to listen – to focus on listening in order to define the shape and direction of the walk, in response both to practised knowledge of the place through repeated walks, and to the exigencies of the moment; weather, sudden unusual sounds, shifts in perspective and experience.

Listening is affected by the context of the soundwalk: whether recorded or not, whether solo or group. Group soundwalks are often led by a listening guide who will suggest ways of listening including musical listening to pitches, rhythms, textures, harmonies; subjective listening while thinking about relationships between bodily sounds and their surroundings; historical listening in which people think of other times they and others have walked in that place or in similar places and how the present sounds are similar or different; political listening when paying attention to which sounds are more ubiquitous,

which masked, which inaudible and who controls these sounds; and evocative listening where the listener pays attention to related sensual associations that are brought to the surface. In public soundwalks, participants often comment on their awareness of listening as a group, of the group presence as they listen and move together in silence through a place, a moving awareness that can heighten the listening experience and contributes a lively energy to the discussions afterward.

When a recordist listens during recording, monitoring on headphones, the sound environment is shaped by the microphone and amplified into the headphones, and the experience is shaped by other inhabitants' awareness of the recordist's presence in the space. Soundwalk recording is mobile recording, and even if the recordist moves silently, their change in perspective is audible in the space. Unlike in the sound studio, sources are not artificially baffled, isolated from each other and manipulable as separate sources. Sounds are heard and recorded in their wild state, overlapping in an environment which changes unpredictably. A recordist's skill as an improviser is evident in the way they adapt their recording practices to weather, to surprise changes in the sound environment, to rich sonic relationships that become evident and can be made more evident through shifts in recording perspective. Recordists need to stay alert to listening and thinking about microphone movement as they work.

Listen to Apple blossom soundwalk (May 2009) (archived with this essay in ICASP's Research Collection: [www.improvcommunity.ca](http://www.improvcommunity.ca) and also available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awqfKZ2Y0Lw>). This recording is an excerpt of a soundwalk that is a trace of a repeated practice, a walk down the driveway of a farm in southern Ontario; a farm where there has been no pesticide or herbicide use for thirty years. The practice of that place, the repetition of walks, provides a knowledge of the potential for pleasurable listening there, and for framing decisions about timing and pacing. This soundwalk takes place mid-morning in May 2009 on a sunny day when bees and wasps are attracted to the apple blossoms. I walk slowly, my feet crunching last year's dried leaves and grasses and the gravel of the driveway. Taken by the buzzing in the tree, I stop to listen. It is a stuttering walk, stopping in wonder, moving forward -- closer to the tree, stopping again. The frogs spill out of their night-time niche, singing here with the birds. Traffic passes on a far-off road, swarming with the bees. The soundscape is densely textured, rich with repeated, but not looped, rhythms. Recording, I walk more slowly than other times walking the dog or with my sister, or going to get the newspaper. Soundwalking, I pay more attention.

#### Field recording and processing

This recording was made with a flash recorder and in-ear binaural microphones. This provides a recording that is very high audio quality but is not directional. With binaural mics in my ears, I cannot monitor simultaneously with headphones and need to rely on prior experience in order to monitor levels and make sure there is no peaking. Long hair provides wind protection for the mics.

In this recording, as sounds catch my attention, I move my head or move towards a sound, stop bodily movement and become still, use my body to shield the wind and provide a haven of quiet. More directional cardioid or hyper-cardioid microphones record a more specific swath of the sonic surroundings, like sharper and sharper brushes used by a painter. This allows for more pointed improvisation with perspective, and can also allow the recordist to get into structures that ears cannot enter, like drainage pipes or crevices. On the farm driveway with nearby wetland, the open and clear perspective of the binaural microphones reveals subtle shifts, turns of the head, changes in perspective, and sudden signals in the dense sonic texture without direct pointing.

### Playing with recordings

In soundscape installations, I attempt to create situations where listeners can participate directly in the sounding of an environment by interacting with soundscape recordings in different ways. In Soundwalk to Home (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDLEB62no4g>), listeners chose to hear different recordings that were described in a booklet where they were invited to write about their listening experience. In Journées Sonores, canal de Lachine, (audio with stills at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82XXxD8oYDg> ; video documentation at <http://www.yorku.ca/dws/lachine/>), listeners could choose contemporary and historical pieces linked to descriptions in a magazine, while sitting under a 50s style hairdryer; and in the larger space of the gallery, could mix eight stereo tracks of soundscape recordings from the canal environment, such as ice movement, housing construction, calls of swallows around bird houses, road traffic crossing a bridge and so on. In each case there is a listening engagement with the sounds of the environment through choosing and reflecting, listening while mixing, thinking about relative dynamics and relationships between this controlled sonic space of the gallery and the surrounding sonic environment. In each case, opportunities are given to listeners to discuss their experience. An installation currently in development will allow listeners to interact with soundwalk recordings through their movement in a gallery space and through live mic input.

What are the possibilities of environmental sound recordings as a source for an instrumentalist to improvise? I asked an experienced improviser, Montreal guitarist, kalimba player and composer Rainer Wiens, to work with four pieces derived from soundwalks. Some, like In Transit, were completely composed pieces (in this case, about soundwalks around the Toronto transit system). <http://www.youtube.com/user/andrasound#p/search/0/mvTypfOtD3g>

Others, like the Apple blossom soundwalk, were framed but unedited moments from longer soundwalks, that I had excerpted because they were particularly striking and remarkable on repeated listening. Of the four soundscapes that I gave him, Wiens preferred playing with the Apple blossom soundwalk because it was more open and felt less finished than the completely composed pieces, and because the environment is so dense and varied, timbrally and rhythmically complex. This allows for many points of

entry for an improviser and therefore makes the stillness and lack of direct response of the recorded medium less of a problem than it would be with soundscapes of more isolated sounds.

Listen to RW Apple blossom kalimba mix (archived with this essay in ICASP's Research Collection: [www.improvcommunity.ca](http://www.improvcommunity.ca) ). This is a stereo mix of two takes of kalimba improvisations by Rainer Wiens in response to the Apple blossom soundwalk excerpt. They have been placed one in the left channel and one in the right so that you can use panning to listen to either separately or both together. While there are many differences in melody and rhythmic phrasing, both improvisations have a similar feel, and sound like similar species when played together.

Recently, the Soundwalking Interactions project received funding from the Quebec government (FQRSC) to do research on soundwalking, improvisation and audience-artist communication. The next stage of research on soundwalks and improvisation includes thinking about ways of improvising more directly with sources derived from soundwalks, employing audio processes to reveal different aspects of the sonic environment, and linking these processes to gestural interfaces. Framing and juxtaposition can focus attention on relationships between different sounds. Filtering and equalizing can reveal quiet sounds and how they are masked by louder noises. Pitch shifting can change the scale of sounds and reveal timbral subtleties. Repetition and layering can focus attention on rhythmic qualities of the sound. Working with Professor Don Sinclair of York University, we are investigating ways to register motion (using video grab and MAX) through a gallery space and express that motion by changing the sound in the space in a way that will be audible and tangible to listeners. As part of the process of making such an installation, practising in a program like Ableton Live allows different sonic structures to be auditioned in a gestural way on a keyboard or mixer.

Thinking about soundwalks and improvisation for this research project continues to be informed by the work and ideas of experienced practitioners in the field. Three improvisers: Malcolm Goldstein, Kathy Kennedy and Rainer Wiens, have each been invited to do a forty minute soundwalk, which will be recorded and discussed with each musician as part of the Soundwalking Interactions research project. Listening in soundwalks needs to be active, imaginative, dynamic and attendant to the requirements of the moment, similar to the listening of improvising musicians. The work of the soundwalk artist is crucial in designing structures and providing models for soundwalking strategies. Participants in soundwalks and soundwalk-inspired experiences and installations can be encouraged to use improvisational tactics to respond to sound immediately and imaginatively, deepening their listening experience. This focus on listening draws attention to the important role of the *audience*.

## Bibliography

Augoyard, Jean Francois. Step by Step: everyday walks in a French urban housing project. Foreword by Francoise Choay; translated and with an afterword by David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis, MN: 2007. Originally published as Pas a Pas: Essai sur le cheminement quotidien en milieu urbain, Editions du Seuil, 1979.

British Educational Communications and Technology Agency. ICT Advice: Using web-based resources in primary music: Soundwalk. Coventry, UK: 2003. Accessed online: [www.mmiweb.org.uk/publications/webprimary/music.pdf](http://www.mmiweb.org.uk/publications/webprimary/music.pdf). March 2010.

Debord, Guy. "Théorie de la dérive." Internationale Situationniste #2 (Paris, December 1958). Situationist International Anthology (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006). Translated by Ken Knabb. Online at: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>. Accessed December 8, 2008.

de Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984.

EContact! 4.3 Promenade Sonore/Soundwalk. Canadian Electroacoustic Community.

April 2002. Text, still images, sound. <http://econtact.ca>.

Goldstein, Malcolm. Sounding the Full Circle (concerning improvisation and other related matters). Sheffield, Vt., U.S.A: M. Goldstein, 1988.

Hall, Tom, Brett Lashua and Amanda Coffey "Sound and the Everyday in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry*. 2008 (14). 1019-1040.

McCartney, Andra. "Performing soundwalks for Journees Sonores, canal de Lachine." Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts. Edited by Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang. 2005: 217-234.

Ratcliffe, Krista. Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a "Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct" College Composition and Communication, Vol. 51, No. 2. (Dec., 1999), pp. 195-224.

Thoreau, Henry David. Walking. Applewood: Bedford MA (Concord), 1862.

Tixier, Nicolas. "Street listening. A characterisation of the sound environment: the 'qualified listening in motion' method." *Soundscape Studies and Methods*. Edited by Helmi Jarviluoma and Gregg Wagstaff. Turku: Finnish Society for Ethnomusicology, 2002: 83-90.

Wagstaff, Gregg. "Soundwalks." *Radio Art Companion*. Toronto, ON: New Adventures in Sound Art, 2002 (a).

Westerkamp, Hildegard. "Soundwalking as Ecological Practice." *The West Meets the East in Acoustic Ecology*. Hirosaki, Japan: Japanese Association for Sound Ecology, 2006: 84-91.

Westerkamp, Hildegard. "Soundwalking." *Sound Heritage* 3 no. 4, 1974: 18-27. Republished in *Autumn Leaves, Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, Edited by Angus Carlyle. Paris: Double Entendre, 2007.

Whitehead, Simon. *Walking to work*. Abercych, Pembrokeshire, Wales: Shoeless, 2006.