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The Tuning of the World: First Conferance on the Global
Soundscape

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For one week in August, an unprecedented gathering took place at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Nestled amidst the peaks of the Canadian Rockies, a hundred and fifty musicians, composers, ecologists, radio producers, sound artists, philosophers, journalists, and activists met together to honor the sixtieth birthday of Canada's pioneer composer and sonic environmentalist, R. Murray Schafer.

Many Trumpeter readers are no doubt familiar with Schafer's musicomythological performances that take place at the juncture between humanity and earth. His *Princess and the Stars* was written to be performed at dawn on a wilderness lake, depicting the beginning of his vast ten part cycle of theatrical extravaganzas that replay the story of Theseus (Wolf) and Ariadne (the Princess) in various guises from the sixties to ancient Egypt. The conclusion will be *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*, a week long participatory journey to be experienced by the audience in tandem with the performers, who will have worked years together before the plans for the adventure will be ready.

Schafer is also the inventor of the term soundscape, recognizing the surrounding world of sonic material as a distinct part of the sense environment. As the landscape is seen, the soundscape is heard. As modern civilization encroaches upon nature and tradition, the sound needs to be identified and saved as much as the land. In his landmark study of environmental sound in global musical and cultural history, called *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer awakened a reading public worldwide to the possibility of listening to what surrounds us as a vast musical composition, with innumerable movements and changes of timbre and mood, written by no one, assembled by everyone, more often taken for granted to than listened to by most of us involved in its performance.

Over the years since, Schafer has read into the literature of the deep ecology movement, investigating how musicians might contribute to the solution of the environmental crisis. He coined another neologism, *musecology*, not only study but an activism from art for the earth. Musicians should fight noise pollution, and recognize how many prize instruments depend on rare tropical woods, that should be cultivated so that they are renewable before they are depleted away. (The Mpinga tree of Tanzania, source of granadilla wood for clarinets and oboes, just may be saved because it is such a valued commodity, and has been for several centuries.)

And yet Schafer is no easy mentor, or calm and collected gray eminence. He has been called a curmudgeon by some, mainly because he will not let anyone get away with any weak kind of inspiration. Paying attention has always been work as much as it is release, and taking in the sound is no different. Schafer believes that music today is as much a part of global malaise as it might be an antidote. Here is his litany on what it has become:

Music to cover the desecration of nature. Music wired into the slums to replace it. Music to dope the youthful protestor. Music to torture the independent thinker. This is the totalitarian arrangement of the modern state conjoining industrialists and politicians in their malevolent conspiracy to bring everything under this domination. Like the priests of Moloch, they cry to the musicians: "Louder, louder, we can still hear their screams!" And the musicians beat their brass cymbals louder and louder to cover the faint shrieks of the victims as they are dropped into the pot of fire. (Voices of Tyranny, Temples of Silence, p. 153)

A bit melodramatic, but Schafer has a point. Music gets louder and louder, and musicians forget to listen as they turn up to eleven. He has little respect for the artificial amplification of today's popular music, piped in and taken for granted the more it is heard everywhere our culture spreads, with the listener having no power to shut it out. Who needs to play any more, if music is always in the background, serving as a soundtrack for our lives?

On the other hand, in the past and in cultures closer to the making of the things that they use, music is something intricately bound between a player and what she plays. Schafer remembers the words of Sufi poet Rumi, on an instrument crying to be returned to its natural home:

Hearken to the reed flute, how it complains,
Lamenting banishment from home;
"Since they tore me from my forest bed,
My plaintive notes have moved people to tears.
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,
And to express my yearning for my home.
He who abides far away from home
Is ever longing for the day of return.
My wailing is heard behind every song,
In concert with weeping and rejoicing.
Each player blends my blowing with her own feelings,
No one fathoms the secrets of my heart.
(Voices of Tyranny, Temples of Silence, p. 157)

Who knows best where an instrument belongs and feels at home? Nowadays we take even the plethora of natural sound for granted, with any noise available for any use. Schafer says no; an ecology of sound should tell us which timbres fit into which worlds.

For the last twenty years, a dedicated community of listeners and composers have been searching for those sounds which are true to the places and cultures that produce them. This conference was the first time this global community met together. I for one was shocked at how proliferate the connection between music and ecology appears to be. People from diverse countries and walks of life had actually built careers around this connection, and many of us, thinking we were mostly alone in traveling these intertwined paths, were pleased to discover how much common ground there was to share.

How have we learned to appropriate and study the vast soundworld around us? Technology has certainly been important in teaching us how to listen. Throughout the five day event we heard numerous recordings, both analog and digital, of sound moments from all over the world. A loon cries on a placid Yukon lake; in the distance a pickup skids on a gravel highway. A rare jungle bird warbles a cry that almost no humans have ever heard in the flesh. Insects beat their wings and make love, a chorus magnified a thousandfold in those occasional years when the seventeen-year locusts return.

"Too much tape!" Schafer cried, presiding contentiously over the celebration in his honor. Too much replacement of the real sound by cheap electromagnetic imitation. "Don't deny your real and immediate soundscape by masking it with machines," he admonished. "What makes you think you have the right to travel to some remote and pristine place to steal the sound out from its rightful place and time?"

Some recording, he went on, could be justified. All of us were most impressed by the ethno-musicology of Steve Feld, who has documented for years the close relationship between the Bosavi people of inner New Guinea with the animal and waterfall sounds of the forest in which they live. Feld spoke of *dulugu ganalan*, "lift up-over-sounding", a native and aural way of describing deep ecology: a harmonious blend between the human and animal ways of life in the world.

This kind of recording, admitted Schafer, is acceptable, because Feld knows both the Latin and native names for all the species making the sounds on his recording. He has done his research, he has not appropriated a soundworld that does not want him. When we hear his CD, we hear the pure sound of the forest, birds high and low, water dripping from leaves and insects clinging to trees, give way to humans songs and cries, playing off the birds and their phrases. As a result of this blend of the natural with the human, the California-based retail chain The Nature Company refused to distribute these CDs, whose profits are to be donated to the Bosavi Peoples Fund, because the presence of human sounds "ruined the natural beauty".

This kind of opposition between people and environment is exactly the schism that this conference was fighting against. The purpose of attention to the soundscape is to increase people's awareness of the world around them. We use sound much more directly to communicate to others, speaking, shouting, or singing,

but we are used to taking in information by sight, looking around, observing, reading. If we make time to listen, the world is ever more real, imminent, and essential to us.

Mary and Bill Buchan of New York presented their sonic playgrounds, which have been built in select inner city schools across the nation. There are booming metallic drums for kids to bang on and jam together, listening phones tied to pipes going deep down into the gurgling sewers, parabolic and elliptic sound reflectors that gather the loose sounds of distant places into the focal points for sudden immediacy. Sheets of metal that sound like thunder, a complete playpen not just of noise, but of listening and discovery.

An inspiration of Schafer and all those concerned with listening outward to the world is the composer and philosopher of the avant-garde, John Cage, who would have attended the Tuning gathering had he not passed away last year just weeks before his own eightieth birthday. Few realize that Cage was a serious student of nature, and found in the environment the strongest inspiration for his own writings and performance ideas. In teaching he told his students to use art to compose the environment.

The reason I am less interested in music is not only that I find environmental sounds and noises more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world's musical cultures, but that, when you get right down to it, a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. (*A Year from Monday*, p. ix)

A John Cage "MusiCircus" was held, with performance of Cage's anarchic instructions going on simultaneously in a building full of different rooms and musical corridors. Some were exact notations, others bare suggestions, but all were meant to teach the audience to listen before they could judge, to free themselves from their likes and dislikes so that the full emotion of nature could be taken in.

Listening and blending in to the sound around is older than the shock of the new, even in our own tradition. One of the most moving performances was a duet of two Swiss alphorn players on the lawn, blending in harmony and echoing back and forth from the summits of Rundell and Cascade. The clear and plaintive major chords bounced back across the mountainsides, dissipating into the enharmonic breath of the wind.

Jerry Mander, master Luddite and unplugged of television sets, urged the crowd to consider ourselves as activists, not passive listeners. Schafer cautioned years ago that the diversity of world soundscapes is fragile, and could be yet once more casualty of the spreading monoculture. Once the champions of the sonic surroundings work to teach most thoughtful hearing, we need to instill in students a sense of value of sounds of tradition and nature. There is thus a

conservative side to all this experimentation. Save the sounds of our memories not for the sake of nostalgia, but because they are necessary for the survival of the world.

After the conference, I headed into the wilderness for a week with a friend. We talked less, and listened more. The sound of footsteps on the muddy trails, the whistle of wind in the rocks, the roar of glacial waters crashing down from the source, the groaning slow movement of the giant ice. The stop of the heart and the cry of release when slipping into a green and almost- frozen pool of water. It all needs to be heard to be enjoyed, even if what is sensed does not make a sound. Silence is no myth of the mind, but a way of concentrating on the emptiness even if we know it can't really be there. If we know the unheard cry of the world, we will not let it elude us or be destroyed.

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