

Editorial

Electroacoustic compositional practice has had a varied and often troublesome relationship to the ‘real world’. A dominant trend among acousmatic composers has been to create abstract sound shapes that reveal little about their real-world sources, whether recorded samples or synthetic material. Even when a real-world sound is identifiable, the compositional context usually makes it clear that the work is not particularly about the social or environmental emplacement of that sound.

Soundscape composition has become a relatively well-defined genre, often characterised as being intimately located to place. Although that may be true in many instances, it can also be understood as a range of approaches within an even broader concept, namely what this issue proposes to term ‘context-based composition’. One of the aims of the issue is not only to provide a survey of contemporary examples of this approach and concept but also to think more seriously about how it can be defined, what are its implications and affordances, and what emerging practices seem most fruitful.

A key distinguishing feature of context-based composition is that real-world contexts inform the design and composition of aurally based work at every level, that is, in the materials, their organisation, and ultimately the work’s placement within cultural contexts. Perhaps most significantly, listeners are encouraged to bring their knowledge of real-world contexts into their participation with these works. As such they fundamentally differ from an approach that utilises sounds related only to each other in an apparently autonomous form. Context-based practice can, among other approaches, range from sonifications, phonographic uses of field recordings, to site-specific installations, and abstracted soundscape compositions based in real-world or even virtual, imagined spaces.

The above paragraphs are taken from the original call for submissions to this theme issue, intended as a kind of challenge for authors, particularly a younger generation of scholars and practitioners, to react to and evaluate whether this formulation of yet another terminological phrase (context-based composition) would be embraced or disputed. At the same time, I taught a graduate course at the Technical University in Berlin using the same subject description to test the concept at a practical pedagogical level, in this case with students many of whom did not self-identify as composers, but who had technical, artistic and musical interests of various kinds.

The response in both cases has been overwhelmingly positive, I am pleased to report. We received a substantial

number of submissions for this issue, such that, in coordination with *Organised Sound* editor Leigh Landy, a second issue in volume 23(1) is already in place, and with the Berlin students, we organised a final concert of ten works, both stereo and multi-channel, plus a project that has been published online (Haberl 2016). No doubt there have been many reasons for these responses, but I would like to think that my intent of being more inclusive to a wider range of practices than is typical within a strictly musical or concert environment is one contributing factor. Another seems to be an implicit desire by individuals to integrate their sonic creativity within the broader social, cultural and ecological context of today’s world. Do I dare hope that many of today’s practitioners, both emerging and professional, are not content to reside in a musical ‘ivory tower’, but would like to reach a wider audience and feel that their skills have some social value both within and outside the purely artistic world?

Of course, this publishing project is hardly without historic precedents. Twenty years ago, Katharine Norman edited an issue of *Contemporary Music Review* with the lovely subtitle ‘A Poetry of Reality’. Its theme was to examine ‘the aesthetic implications of employing sounds from the real world as musical material’, resulting in what she called ‘real-world music’ (Norman 1996: 1). One of her most insightful contributions was how she presented the relation between ‘referential’, ‘reflective’ and ‘contextual’ listening, and today we can see both the tensions and the opportunities in how composers and sound designers exploit this terrain. I am tempted to categorise these three aspects conceptually (and less poetically) as objective, subjective and communicational approaches (Truax 2012b). With today’s easy access to field recording and online databases of environmental samples, it is inevitable that many ‘users’ will do just that, simply use such recordings as raw material with little regard for (or knowledge of in some cases) the original context from which they came. At the other end of the continuum is an integration of all three approaches, where I understand soundscape composers as wanting to involve themselves and their listeners in a deepened relationship to some aspect of the real world, with techniques ranging from sonification and phonography to more abstracted approaches (Truax 2012a).

Other historic precedents go even further back. One thinks of individual pioneers such as Walter Ruttmann,

Ludwig Koch, Tony Schwartz, Luc Ferrari and various proponents of the aural documentary as precursors to current work, and luckily samples of their work are becoming increasingly available. It has also been gratifying to note, particularly in the contributions to this issue, the recognition of R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project (WSP) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in the 1970s, of which I was a member, as being seminal for the emerging practices of both acoustic ecology and soundscape composition (Truax 1996a, 2002, 2008). Perhaps not surprisingly at this remove, concepts that were developed there have received critical re-evaluation, particularly concerning Schafer's prescriptive ideals (Kelman 2010). Ingold's critique of the term 'soundscape' and other linguistic implications of sound-related language has been particularly useful and widely cited (Ingold 2007). In my view, the neologisms introduced and used by Schafer (e.g. soundscape, schizophonia, soundmark, earwitness, hi-fi/lo-fi) were intended as rhetorical devices to communicate new concepts to a wider audience, not as robust concepts that could withstand scholarly analysis, as useful as that may still be.

Other misconceptions about the WSP group itself have occurred. Most frequently we have been referred to as 'students' of Schafer, or less generously as a 'clique' (Demers 2010: 121) or 'acolytes' (Akiyama 2010: 59), instead of what we actually were: paid research assistants, obviously young, rather idealistic and not particularly well trained in environmental research. However, after the group disbanded when Schafer left SFU (1975) and a few years later funding was rather brutally terminated (Truax 1996b: 72), some of us developed the ideas further: Hildegard Westerkamp with soundwalking and composition (Westerkamp 2002), and myself in terms of acoustic communication and also composition. The creation of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology at Banff, Alberta, in 1993, marked a renewal and broadening of the original WSP ideas to a formal international presence that continues to this day. To have this continuing legacy derive from what was a small and rather ad hoc group over 40 years ago seems quite remarkable to me.

To return to the theme of this issue, soundscape composition is generally regarded as place-based, and with this issue I have suggested an extension to all forms of real-world, or context-based, compositional approaches. The history of soundscape work has provided a rich foundation and many suggestive, innovative examples. Therefore, the intent of this issue is to survey a wide range of contemporary (and some historical) approaches and to probe their implications and issues both theoretically and in practice, with the two ideally intertwined as all of our authors have done. Each of the two theme issues will include examples across that spectrum.

Andrew Hill initiates the discussion with key questions about what constitutes real-world sound and how context can be implicated in the listening and compositional process. As all field recordists recognise (Drever 2017), the recorded sound may evoke images of place and context, but they are never a transparent or neutral representation, and they are always dependent on the listener's interpretation and experience. Hill concludes that the resulting 'constructed context' is a dynamic interplay between composer and listener that is in fact liberating for both parties. Charles Underriner takes us even further by proposing the 'audio reality effect' (following Barthes's literary version) where a recording might not only suggest mimesis and evoke a listener's own experience, but also create an 'alternate reality' that seems equally plausible – what he calls a 'sound-poetry of the instability of reality'.

A number of submissions have proceeded from an ecological perspective, perhaps not surprisingly given current concerns about environmental sustainability, and therefore both issues will include articles relevant to this topic. Jonathan Gilmurray provides a comprehensive taxonomy of 'ecological sound art' (which he distinguishes from merely the use of environmental sound), noting that it has not received as much critical discourse as ecological approaches have in other disciplines. His five functional categories provide a useful map to current practices and the ecological issues involved. David Chapman follows with a perception-based approach for both direct and mediated experience of sonic environments. The extent to which listening habits and abilities have been changed by technology (in both more analytic and distracted dimensions) is not often acknowledged, and these affordances (to use the popular term from Gibson) affect both the producer and the receiver. This issue also includes a more personal essay by a representative of the millennial generation, André Pinto, in which he passionately argues for a 'rewilding' of the ear (following George Monbiot's concept) to allow us to reconnect with the (endangered) natural world.

The remaining articles in this issue address various applied topics, often within a strong theoretical framework. Damián Keller and Victor Lazzarini, leaders of the Ubiquitous Music Group, give an extensive outline (and bibliography) of current ecologically grounded creative practices, based on the 'application of embedded-embodied cognition'. Samuel Thulin refers to 'situated composition' in relation to emergent mobile technology, a creative process that is 'inherently distributed and collaborative' and intimately connected to real-world situations. Lauren Hayes documents her own experiences as a performer who has developed a set of practices that are 'site-responsive' as distinct from 'site specific'.

Sound installations provide an interdisciplinary format for public presentation, increasingly located in galleries, and Felipe Otondo describes two pilot projects that explore the spatial and temporal aspects of rural and urban field recordings in relation to soundscape ecology, including listener responses as to their effectiveness. Sanne Krogh Groth and Kristine Samson analyse two sound art performances in Copenhagen from the perspective of how each dealt with the complete social and cultural context (or 'situation' in the authors' term) with varying degrees of success. Research about two historically important sound art works by Bill Fontana and David Dunn are presented by Robert Stokowy and Edward Davis, respectively, with an emphasis on the original sound design in relation to its subsequent documentation or lack thereof. Finally, in a welcome departure from the largely artistic concerns of the previous authors, Martin Ljungdahl Eriksson, Lena Pareto and Ricardo Atienza present a scientific evaluation of the design of a particular workplace application that creates a 'sound bubble' around the user. In particular, the project utilises electroacoustic sound design techniques to create a functional (context-sensitive) sonic environment appropriate to the working situation.

Although these articles, considered together, present an impressive array of current thinking on this emergent field of creative work, they by no means exhaust the subject as will be seen in the following issue, as well as hopefully in future work. I want to particularly thank all of the contributors, and acknowledge the work of my reviewers and the journal editor, Leigh Landy, in the excellent support of this publication and its theme.

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