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# Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk*: shifting perspectives in real world music

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**Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* challenges us as listeners to re-evaluate our acoustic soundscape. Juxtaposing the sounds of barnacles with the noise of the city, Westerkamp reveals an unbalanced world in which individual voices are silenced. *Kits Beach Soundwalk* allows Westerkamp to help rectify that imbalance. It provides her with the opportunity to create a place in which a listener can take pleasure in simply being. She reveals the metaphors, the hidden entrances, within sounds that take us into other spaces. A listener travels with Westerkamp into worlds of tiny sounds and tiny voices, dreams, and places of fantasy and the imagination. She challenges us as listeners to re-establish our place within the world around us. By designing the piece to reach the audience on a number of levels – intellectual, physiological, metaphorical – Westerkamp effectively promotes the changing of listening habits; the distancing of individuals from oppressive sonic environments; and the regaining of an individual's inner voice.**

Looking out at the arteries of bridges and roads, with the honking of car horns and the screeching of tyres, I want to run away. Even in our world of standby airline tickets and sensory deprivation tanks, how can one possibly hope to escape this moment-by-moment barrage of buzzers and sirens, of traffic belches and whining machinery, of lights and appliances humming a single, unending, unchanging sound. I find hope, relief and insight in Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (KBS).

'It's a calm morning. I'm on Kits Beach in Vancouver. It's slightly overcast and very mild for January. It's absolutely wind-still. The ocean is flat' . . . it is in this peaceful environment that we join Westerkamp for an aural journey through her observations and experience of Kits Beach. As waves lap in the background, Westerkamp mentions how she's 'standing amongst some large rocks full of barnacles and seaweed'. Deceptively simple, Westerkamp's introduction fulfils a number of functions. Her choice of words, the easy pacing, the familiar relaxed setting create an inviting environment in which a listener can feel at ease. His or her engagement with the piece is of course unique and personal. One can reasonably argue, though, that Westerkamp's intention is in part to create a world that engages a listener's imagination, and opens him/her up

to what is to follow. Whether or not Westerkamp succeeds depends on each individual listener.

From here, Westerkamp takes us into a world of . . . barnacles!? We hear their 'clicking' as they 'put out their fingers to feed on the water'. We might at this point start to wonder why Westerkamp would make a piece about *barnacles*. They seem so . . . inconsequential. And this we will discover is exactly why she has chosen them.

Juxtaposed with these tiny creatures, Westerkamp introduces the noise of the city as part of what seems a passive background. Westerkamp comments how when she wants to hear the barnacles in more detail, 'in all their tiny-ness', the sound of the city 'interferes with her listening. It occupies all acoustic space'. This imbalance between the tiny voices in the soundscape and the urban roar of our environment concerns Westerkamp. Beyond interfering with her listening pleasure, this acoustic imbalance undermines Westerkamp's sense of self. Filtering the city out takes too much effort. It overwhelms, leaving one silent. As Westerkamp points out:

a noisy soundscape drowns out our footsteps, our breathing, our normal speaking voice; an authoritarian environment does not have to be loud for us to lower our voices or not to talk at all. As long as we accept noise or the voices / sounds of authority as the dominant sounds that set the 'tone' of an environment, other tones and voices (such as our own) have no place there and are indeed often silenced. (Westerkamp 1988: 1)

Her inability to hear the tiny voices and to 'filter the city out' embodies a relationship between Westerkamp – the individual – the background 'authoritarian environment', and all the 'tiny sounds', tiny voices within one's life, including her own inner voice.

For Westerkamp, *Kits Beach Soundwalk* is a way to reclaim her voice as an individual. She stands back and distances herself from the dominating external voices and worlds. Taking up the challenge of Jacques Attali 'to break through the present codes of repetitive society by taking "pleasure in being instead of having"', Westerkamp allows herself the space to exist however she wants, and to use that space to express, to compose to make music (Attali 1985: 3).

Westerkamp's choice of a 'calm', 'wind-still' beach on a January morning with 'ducks quietly floating on the

water' reinforces on an intellectual level the idea of 'being' in a space where one is distanced from an overpowering authoritarian environment. Superficially, KBS is an acknowledgement of the seemingly insignificant, the overlooked, the tiny sounds, the barnacles of our lives. The piece provides an opportunity to give recognition and support – space – to voices that have been silenced.

Westerkamp recognises that the need to have space is not limited to the external world-at-large. "“Being” means that one needs to listen to one’s inner world [in which] creating a space is not dissimilar to giving children the time and space to develop their “inner life”, by allowing them to daydream and fantasize’ (Westerkamp 1988: 122). Her visual descriptions also provide the listener with a space to daydream, to take a moment to be. Westerkamp’s references to the season and time of day ground the piece in a very specific, concrete (as opposed to abstract) reality. Unlike some electroacoustic compositions that create a more aurally ambiguous setting, KBS places the listener within an aural and visual context, a world that s/he can readily identify with. The concrete specificity of the setting is extremely crucial given that Westerkamp uses the interior world of the barnacle sounds for more abstract exploration later in the piece.

It is important to note that Westerkamp does not view one’s need to alter this background environment as akin to an abandonment of technology. As she points out at 3’07”, it is thanks to such products as ‘bandpass filters and equalizers’ that those tiny voices and sounds may be heard again.

The use of technology to deepen one’s listening skills and one’s awareness is further evident in Westerkamp’s use of close miking to explore the inner world of the barnacles. Her presentation of the intimate crackling and tinkling can draw a listener away from a mimetic orientation to an aural form of discourse. This change in perspective directs the listener to a more reflective (as opposed to referential) form of listening. ‘This reflective listening is . . . a creative, enjoyable appraisal of the sound for its acoustic properties’ (Norman 1996: 5). Reflective listening provides a means to redefine one’s relationship to the sounds and the environment; listening for the sake of listening allows one to ‘invent new codes, invent the message at the same time as the language. [It is] playing for one’s own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication . . . the emergence of the free act, self-transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having’ (Westerkamp 1988: 1). In the end, finding one’s voice is not about passively turning away from the whining and belches of traffic; it is not about passive-aggressive attempts to mask the roar of the city with noise bylaws or tranquility CDs. Finding one’s inner voice, regaining the balance, comes down to an active playful engagement with the beast of sound

around us: ‘to play with a monster then I [Westerkamp] can face the monster’ (KBS).

Through the use of the studio, Westerkamp is ‘able to get rid of the city . . . pretend it’s not there’ (KBS). She asks us to ‘pretend we’re somewhere far away’. Westerkamp takes one deeper under the surface. The small, tinkling sounds, absent of the background noise, pull a listener in. This inner world of the barnacles creates an opportunity to shift one’s perspective, and to stimulate the imagination:

While not being realistic, real-world music leaves a door ajar on the reality in which we are situated. I contend that real-world music is not concerned with realism and *cannot* [Norman’s emphasis] be concerned with realism because it seeks, instead, to initiate [sic] a journey which takes us away from our preconceptions, so that we might arrive at a change perhaps expanded, appreciation of reality. (Norman 1996: 19)

One journeys into the barnacle sounds to discover the interrelationship between the ‘tiny voices, the intimate voices’ within the barnacles, and those ‘of nature, of bodies, of dreams, of the imagination’ (KBS). Westerkamp goes on to describe how sounds occupy her dreams, which she then recounts. Dreams of ‘women living in an ancient mountain village . . . weaving the most beautiful silken fabric. It sounded like a million tiny voices’. In another, ‘bullets were tickling like tiny marbles’. In these dreams, one recognises the ‘sounds of the barnacles’ as sounds, but also as an entrance into other spaces. The more concrete an image evoked the better able a sound can transcend sonic abstraction to be both abstract and abstracted, sound and metaphor. This duality of being, of being two completely separate things at the very same time can be extremely powerful in its presence and as a form of communication. The sound bridges two completely unrelated worlds by occupying both at the same time. The more integral that sound is within those worlds, the stronger the connection.

The continuous presence of the tinkling allows a listener to move easily between the images conjured up by Westerkamp’s narrative, and one finds delight in this ability to move between diverse worlds. These metaphorical and imaginative explorations, these journeys into her dreams are rendered all the more profound by the original placement of the listener in the ‘concrete’ reality of Kits Beach. Westerkamp’s journey into the inner world of the barnacles validates the exploration of her own inner world, and ultimately that of the listener. ‘Real-world music, like poetry is impelled by a desire to invoke our internal ‘flight’ of imagination so that, through an imaginative listening to what is ‘immanent in the real’, we might discover what is immanent in us’ (Norman 1996: 26).

Westerkamp’s stories *are* ‘healing dreams’ accessible to a listener. By allowing him or her to discover meaning and order within nature, Westerkamp’s stories have the

potential to diminish a listener's fears of the unknown, of the roaring city. 'Imagined content produces metaphors for complex behaviour that would otherwise be interpreted as chaotic and meaningless' (*ibid.*: 6). In this sense, the sounds of the barnacles reflect the stochastic aspect of nature, and of the smouldering charcoal Westerkamp refers to in Xenakis' *Concret PH II*. We see through the micro level chaos to find a macro level meaning and order. 'As soon as I make space to hear sounds like this, or to dream, then I feel the strength to face the city again' (KBS).

On a purely physical level, both 'the dreams' and KBS as a whole possess, as Westerkamp points out, healing high-frequency sounds. Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a French physician and specialist in otolaryngology, claims that 'high frequencies are sounds that charge our brain and give us energy . . . [and] that as he was training people to hear and identify those frequencies . . . they began to be able to articulate better' (Westerkamp 1988: 140). KBS allows Westerkamp to promote a stronger vocal presence within listeners simply by having them listen.

Westerkamp further recognises that the development of one's voice is inseparable from the development of one's listening skills. According to Dr. Tomatis, 'the extent of one's ability to listen will affect the ease with which one can communicate, especially when the medium of communication is language or singing' (Gilmor 1985: 1). Westerkamp's altering at 1'42" of the background noise serves a number of functions. First, it prepares the listener for more dramatic processing that occurs later in the piece. Secondly, such shifts in the background noise attune the listener to acoustic differences within the environment. Barry Truax writes, 'what I [Truax] have always found the most fascinating is the experience of having the expanded awareness facilitated by technological intervention influence perception later under more normal circumstances' (Truax 1996: 61). That is, these shifts challenge one's fundamental listening habits. Westerkamp directs a listener to see, to hear, this background authoritarian environment not as a permanent fixture to life, but as an aspect ultimately alterable by human desire and intent.

Creating *Kits Beach Soundwalk* was a necessary journey inward, away from the oppressive outer world, to a place where Westerkamp's voice could find expression. Composing is not about producing a musical product; it is a process. 'If the process indeed involves a unity

between physical expression, between listener and soundmaker then there need not be any concern about the outcome. The process – the play's reality – is the outcome' (Westerkamp 1988: 123). By presenting that process of discovery on a number of levels – physical, intellectual, physiological, metaphorical – Westerkamp allows a listener to viscerally share in her journey. 'As listeners, and composers, we may return to real life disturbed, excited and challenged on a spiritual and social plane by a music with hands-on relevance to both our inner and outer lives' (Norman 1996: 5). Hopefully, we possess a greater awareness by which we can also gain the strength to 'play with the monster'.

Looking out at the morning sunrise, I hear the sounds of tinkling and cracking and slurping and sizzling coming from my CD player. They float above the traffic noises below my window. All of a sudden, the words of a narrator speaking of dreams and barnacles are drowned in the long screech of tightening brakes. I laugh at the irony. Then I walk over to the stereo and crank up the volume.

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