

From:

Hein Schoer

The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures

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The »Sounding Museum« fuses anthropology, acoustic ecology, soundscape composition, and trans-cultural communication inside the context of museum education.

Based on the piece »Two Weeks in Alert Bay«, it supplies researchers, practitioners, and audiences with an instrument to gain an acoustic image of the contemporary cultural and everyday life of the Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, BC. The project mediates intercultural competence thorough the affective agency of sound.

With the coeval »Session Musician's Approach«, introduced and analysed in text, audio, and interactive form, it also bridges the gap between art, science, and education. With a foreword by Barry Truax.

The box includes a book, 2 DVD and 1 CD.

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For futher information:

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The Sounding Museum: Four Worlds.

Overview

Four Worlds:

A Sound Entry.

Atmospheric Entry, Introduction, Research Objective, Book Overview

World One:

Hearing Heritage.

Sound and Sound Recording beyond Acoustics, Music and Ear Physiology
Sound History, Sound Recording, Acoustic Ecology, Atmosphere, Intangible Heritage

World Two:

Into the Sonic Wild.

Two Weeks in Alert Bay, Five Months in the Studio
The Piece, Fieldwork & Production Process

Between the Worlds:

How to make a Good Soundscape Composition and the Session Musician Approach.

Research Question and Methodology

World Three:

The Ethnographer's Ear.

Voyagers, Chroniclers and Interpreters
An approach to anthropology from the musician's point of departure

World Four:

Acoustic Experiences at the Lake.

The Museum Side of the Medal
NONAM, Sound Chamber, Workshop Format, Impact Evaluation

Next World:

The Way of the Mask.

Conclusions and Outlook: Successive Projects, Auditory Anthropology

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Four Worlds:

A Sound Entry.

Soundscape Composition as a Tool in Museum Education

Atmospheric Entry, Research Objective & Methodology, Book Overview

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” – with his mouth.

God named the Universe, thinking aloud.

The Egyptian gods came into being when Atum, the creator, named them.

Mithra came into being out of vowels and consonants.

The terrible gods came into being out of thunder,

The fruitful gods came into being out of water.

The magic gods came into being out of laughter.

The mystic gods came into being out of distant echoes.

All creation is original. Every sound is new.

(...)

Sound gets to places where sight cannot.

Sound plunges below the surface.

Sound penetrates to the heart of things.

R. M. Schafer, “I Have Never Seen A Sound”¹

In the past couple of years I have been living in four worlds simultaneously. The Sounding Museum is the approach that I have taken to bring these worlds closer to each other. At its core lies the question “How do I make a *good* cultural soundscape composition for museum-didactic purposes?”

In order to answer this, or, more accurately, to develop a feasible manual to accomplish such a feat, I had to attempt to reconcile the worlds of the sound artist and eco-acoustician, of the native North American (the 'Namgis/Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, BC, to be precise), of the anthropologist, and of the museum visitor, all of whom not only are to be expected to follow their own agendas, at times incompatible with the others', but also to base their perception, communication strategies, and judgements on poly-

¹ Schafer (2009), p.32f

² Schafer (1977b), p.4

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p.153f

genic ontologies, all of which I had to gain an insight into and embrace them as partly my own in order to accomplish my work.

At the centre of the Sounding Museum resides the contemporary cultural soundscape composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”. It is designed to supply museum visitors with a means to gain an acoustic image of the contemporary cultural and everyday life of the Kwakwaka'wakw. A “good” cultural soundscape composition is to convey essential information about a (foreign) culture via the utilisation of the emotional/atmospheric quality of sound. In order to achieve this, specific criteria have to be met.

- The musical and narrative structure needs to be appealing to the listener, and it should convey core elements of the culture it deals with.
- Transparency within the composition and in its auxiliary materials about which sources have been used, which choices have been made during composition, and, most importantly, by whom, needs to be provided.
- For the assembly and compilation of the audio material a collaborative workflow between the researcher and his/her interlocutors has to be applied.

A cultural soundscape composition needs to be stimulating, it should ignite or tend to the fascination with the foreign, that strange and alien world, that brought the listener to tune in in the first place. But “Two Weeks” is, next to its qualification as a composition, foremost an ethnographic document. The questions that need to be addressed therefore are rooted in problems dealt with in ethnographic methodology and anthropological theory, questions of generalisation, representation, coevalness, and self-reflexivity. The most important assets in this respect are *transparency* and a *collaborative attitude*, the latter best subsumed under the *Session Musician’s Approach*.

This *collaborative framework* (Becker 2008) of *joining others* (Pink (2009) grounds all methodological and practical decisions in an approach to

ethnographic research and collaboration with informants that bears strong analogies to the work methods in musical jam sessions. Here, often under the guiding hand of a bandleader, musicians from various backgrounds get together to create a musical performance based on conjointly determined framing conditions and on improvisation. It draws on the *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 1983 [1966]) of the participants, which the bandleader/producer /ethnographer must try to synchronise with that of his/her audience. By *dialogical editing* (Feld 1990) chances for a coevally created product and (affective) comprehensibility for the listener are heightened. Working in an ethnographical context, differences in legal and ethical systems must also be taken into account, such as, for example, cultural taboos, or deviating copy-right concepts. The ethnographer must remain clear – and offensively address this with his audiences – about his own impact on the final product, and about the decision making process, declaring it not to be a representation of ultimate truth, but of his very own version of it. He must also be aware of the distorting *schizophonic* (Schafer 1977b) effects of the dislocation of sound from its source.

The Session Musician's Approach correctly applied engenders an atmosphere of respectful and open-minded communication between two cultures, in which the composer's role is that of a mediator.

But let us hear the story *ab initio*.

i) Origins: The Sounding Museum Begins

We are immersed in a world of sound.

In 1977, after more than a decade of committed research and teaching, the Canadian composer, teacher and professor Raymond Murray Schafer, with "The Tuning of the World", published a first extensive comprehensive essay dealing with this sounding universe that he named *the soundscape*, releasing an avalanche of research, artistic and educative programs, dedicat-

ed to the innumerable ramifications of the field of *acoustic ecology*. Three and a half decades later the world orchestra is still playing, waiting for us to tune in and play along. The concept of the Sounding Museum adheres to Schafer's claim that "the home territory of soundscape studies will be the middle ground between science, society and the arts",² but also of pedagogy, utilising a great deal of Schafer's own pedagogic devices aimed at what he calls *clairaudience*³, the raising of *sonologic* competence⁴, starting already with the very young. Sound is one of the most powerful communication media culture and humankind have at their disposal.

This book is about soundscapes. More precisely, about cultural soundscapes presented in a museum, namely the aboriginal soundscape of North America's Pacific Northwest Coast on display at the NONAM (Nordamerika Native Museum) in Zürich. More than that, with the audio footage included, it will also bring a small sample of the soundscape of the world directly to your ears. And it is "good" if it will communicate, ultimately not only one-way, but interactively, in multiple directions.

Over time, the Sounding Museum has evolved from a visitor study on a specific sound application in an ethnographic museum into an on-going trans-disciplinary project operating at the above-indicated junction between art, science, and education. It all began in 2007, when my friend and mentor Richard Schuckmann asked me along on a trip to Zürich, where we were invited to discuss ideas for the acoustic complementation of a special exhibition on the Arctic cultural area at the NONAM, which eventually resulted in the construction of the *Sound Chamber* and its incorporation as part of the museum's permanent exhibition.

We built a room that was designed to bring the soundscape of North America's indigenous peoples to the museum visitor, in high fidelity surround sound and without the distraction of visual or other sensual stimuli, because we believed that the experience of the sounds of a culture brings an

² Schafer (1977b), p.4

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p.153f

immediacy and intimacy, an immersive quality, that the usual object-focussed approach of classical exhibition design was lacking. After this first archive recording-based production on the Arctic cultural soundscape and the evaluation of its visitor impact the opportunity came along to leave the archives and go out into the field to make our own recordings. That is where my research design took off.

I developed a project that follows all the steps in the making and implementation of a cultural soundscape production, from the planning stages over on-location recording activities and studio work to the use of the finished piece in a workshop conducted in and around the museum and the Sound Chamber located there, resulting in the composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay” and the workshop concept “Das Tönende Museum”. It soon became obvious that this would require more than just skilled audio engineering. Once a work of art leaves the White Cube its contextualisation gains the utmost importance. “Two Weeks” was made in collaboration with members of the 'Namgis First Nation of the Kwakwaka'wakw (the Kwak'waka speaking Nations) of Alert Bay, British Columbia. And it was aimed at a target group eight thousand kilometres away, the visitors of a museum in Zürich. How could these people, living in worlds so far apart, be brought together? And would their intermediaries, the artist and the scientist, be able to mediate, or would they also just exist in their own bubbles of local time?

ii) Components: The Sounding Museum Box of Treasures

The Sounding Museum is my approach to lessen the distance between these local time bubbles, to promote the rapprochement of cultures. For that I employ sound as a key medium of communication, for communication is the means to achieve this rapprochement: We need to listen to each other in order to understand, or at least respect each other, which also means to accept difference, diversity, as a virtue, not an obstacle.

It is a project, which consists of the Sound Chamber, the composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, an interactive map, a workshop concept, and, ultimately, this book, which documents and reflects the pedagogic and artistic devices developed in the course of the project. The book, it is therefore important to note, cannot serve its documentary and reflexive purposes very well if regarded detached from the practical applications that are the result of my work. Since not all readers will be able to visit the Sound Chamber, and therefore also cannot participate in one of the *in situ* workshops, I have compiled a collection of “tangible” products that came out of my research. These are

- the audio CD “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, second edition;
- the DVD-video (sound only) with the original surround pieces;
- the interactive DVD-ROM “Raven Travelling” containing extensive documentary footage;
- and the book “Four Worlds”,

all of which are in your hands now as parts of this boxed set, that I, if my boldness may be excused, chose to call, in line with Northwest Coast indigenous tradition, “The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures.”

iii) The Totem Pole: Book Structure and Digital Media

In front of the NONAM, right next to the entrance, there stands a totem pole carved by Tlingit artist Nathan Jackson. It depicts the story of Raven and Fog Woman,⁵ showing Raven sitting on top of his two slaves with Fog Woman holding a salmon at the bottom.

As with many works of art, much of the story embedded in Jackson’s pole remains in the implicit. For it to become accessible for scientific or

⁵ cp. prelude to World Three; a picture of the pole can be found on the Raven Travelling DVD-ROM, POI NONAM

didactic use they have to be made explicit. Northwest Coast totem poles have occasionally been called “story-telling poles”. This is not entirely adequate.⁶ The poles do not exactly *tell* a story; they often merely depict key elements or characters featured *within* a story. So one cannot “read” a pole as one could read the course and outcome of the Battle of Kadesh at the walls of Abu Simbel. Distinct knowledge about the background is mandatory, and even then there remains quite some room for interpretation.

“The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures” is like a totem pole. It is centred around the cultural soundscape composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, which is made available in two forms, an audio CD, containing the original full version of the composition in stereo and a number of supplemental tracks, and the DVD-Video, which consists of all three versions: the full length 42’ piece and the two shortened versions, the workshop edit of 21’ and the walk-in edit of 6’30’’ in quadraphonic surround sound.⁷ If you have access to a DVD home surround system I recommend to listen to the quadraphonic version, as, by enclosing the listener from all directions, it creates an immersiveness that cannot be fully achieved by means of stereo listening. However, to get a first atmospheric entry into the World of the Kwakwaka'wakw as I experienced it, the CD will do fine. Only after having listened to the piece for a first time will the contents of the book really begin to make sense, but also vice versa: The book contains all the background information on the project that cannot be brought across by the composition alone; it is the kind of artwork that requires explanation in order to be valued to its full depth. I argue, and that will be a recurring topic throughout the book, that, unless affectively effective, a composition, but

⁶ though more suiting than the term totem pole itself; see footnote 395

⁷ Because most players do not support DVD-Audio I have encoded the original 24bit/48kHz files into Dolby AC3 @ 448kbps; not my favourite, but acceptable.

also the presentation of scholarly research,⁸ has failed its purpose. So listen first, get excited, and then go ahead reading.

Like with a totem pole to the uninitiated, this listening experience will very much stay on the surface, you will digest the formal and aesthetic attributes of the composition without much insight into its meaning. However, if its appeal is strong enough, you will develop an interest to find out more. If you then take up the book, like when peeling an onion, all the hidden layers of meaning will be exposed by increasing contextual knowledge.

To dismantle the layers of the totem pole in the book, I have constructed four Worlds and a breakpoint between Worlds Two and Three, that build up on each other, each discussing a question that follows from the previous.

- World One: What is a Soundscape (and are there any indicators that imply its active deployment in cultural education may be of use)?
- World Two: How did I create my own cultural soundscape composition, working in the field, dealing with my interlocutors?
- Between the Worlds: What is a “good” cultural soundscape composition, and which methodological framework should be employed to create one?
- World Three: What reflexive potential do I find in anthropological theory, that can help me out of the dilemmas laid open in the work process?
- World Four: How did the implementation in the museum take place?

In World One I establish sound as a key phenomenon and tool for cultural studies by introducing acoustic ecology, soundscape studies and aesthetic

⁸ You may argue that science has the purpose to improve the living conditions of man (or something similar), and therefore the driest report may result in new innovative devices in service of that task. As you will already hear in World One, at least in case you aim at mediating your findings to a broader audience, this is inseparable from affective judgement nevertheless.

perception as a trans-disciplinary field of research. From a brief look into sound history and the evolution of recording technology the chapter moves on to its main foci, Murray Schafer and Barry Truax' conceptual principles of soundscape theory and the ideas of atmospheric perception as proposed by Gernot Böhme. An excursus into intangible cultural heritage insinuates the link between sound and identity.

With this basis in mind I then take you with me on my field trip to Alert Bay in World Two. In a narrative style, paying tribute to the affective approach taken for the composition itself, but also the research project in general, the *genesis* of the soundscape composition "Two Weeks in Alert Bay" is described and replenished with background information on the cultural heritage and history of the Kwakwaka'wakw, the techniques of soundscape composition, and the production of the piece, with a special spotlight on my own doings and dealings with the people and the decisions I took in the composition process.

The "Raven Travelling" DVD-ROM, that is also part of the Box of Treasures, comes in particularly handy at this point. It contains plentiful supplemental material, raw audio, photographs, videos, and other data, that broaden the scope of immediate knowledge about the situational context of the "Two Weeks" field experience. On an interactive map you can navigate to places and events that may help fill the information gaps in the piece and its documentation in World Two.

The breakpoint "Between the Worlds" that follows, constitutes the watershed between the two larger themes of the book: sound, the soundscape, and soundscape composition as a cultural asset in Worlds One and Two on the one hand, and intercultural competence and education in Worlds Three and Four on the other. In the light of the experiences made during the fieldwork for the project, this chapter discusses related theories and methodologies to consolidate them into an improved framework, the Session Musician's Approach, as applicable to the special field of cultural soundscape composition. The decision to place the objective/methodology discussion after the actual field report has also a methodological background, which

adheres to a central theoretical claim of this book: I want you to gain an affective access to “Two Weeks in Alert Bay” before analytically dissecting it. Between the Worlds is the transition from making to mediation, from action to reflection.

World Three covers a number of problems that surfaced, but were not systematically addressed, in World Two: research ethics, orientalism, coevalness, and representation. These are rooted in the history of anthropology and its colonial heritage, and deeply intervened with my sound work, in theoretical as well as practical terms. Hence, World Three probes into these, looking at classical concepts by Boas, Lévi-Strauss, and others, and discusses, with Fabian’s claim for coevalness and the here introduced *First Voices perspective*, alternatives to “classical” anthropology with a special focus on a lay audience, the main target group of the Sounding Museum.

World Four, after summarizing some main historical developments and a contemporary definition of the purpose of the museum, as well as reporting a number of examples of sound applications in various institutes, returns to the issue of representation in the light of exhibition design. Its main body, however, is dedicated to the second part of the fieldwork: After completion of the production, “Two Weeks” was used at the NONAM for workshops, which I analyse with regard to the assumed visitor impact of soundscape implementation.

I have illustrated the various perspectives that are represented by the Four Worlds by applying different writing styles. While World One, explicating the theoretical background for the remainder of the book, has a rather didactic tone, World Two features a more colloquial, narrative style, and is written from a very personal perspective, appropriate to its field diary-like nature. Between the Worlds and World Three, which discuss my own, the Session Musician’s, approach and reception-related aspects of “classical” anthropology, despite its clear political stance, returns to an analytical, more impersonal point of view, and World Four get us back down to Earth with the observations I made while conducting workshops with school classes.

The book closes with a concluding coda, which also offers a peek into potential future developments of the Sounding Museum, as well as a proposal for the introduction of an auditory anthropology. It offers my own conclusions, and it also leaves enough room for the reader's ideas. This cannot compete with being Kwakwaka'wakw, but I hope that I have offered enough material to create an illusion, break it down again, and in the end allow you to make your own judgement.

iv) Addendum: Raven Tales

Raven, who goes by the name of U'melth among the Kwakwaka'wakw, is one of the most important figures in Northwest Coast folk-lore, and my favourite among the supernatural beings that populate their mythological pantheon.

He is a cultural hero and a creator-trickster in the same tradition as coyote and mink in other North American indigenous cultures, and in this double function he has always been of ambivalent nature, his often ill-motivated, selfish actions ultimately resulting in beneficial outcomes for the people. He is the bringer of light and water, the creator of the land, and the teacher of many skills, but also introduced death into the world.⁹

U'melth, Raven, shall therefore be our Master of Ceremony throughout this book. Every new World opens with a Raven Tale. None of these are original in the sense of being reproduced here the way they have "always been

⁹ See also <http://www.eldrbarry.net/rabb/rvn/raven.htm>

One general remark on the use of internet resources: I am referring to numerous web links throughout this book. Whole books were retrieved from the internet, or information from websites of institutions or companies concerning activities or conceptual ideas, which would not differ in depth or detail in printed form. Wikipedia, although frequently utilised, was only consulted for very basic data, like the birth dates of mentioned persons.

told”. For once, it would be impossible in an oral culture (any culture, in fact) to trace back a myth to its literal origins, secondly, the tradition of storytelling draws its strength from the ability of adaptation, and thirdly, from the many versions available, there is no single one that could claim to be the only true form. So, also as a concession to my own narrative needs, I have decided to casually rewrite some of the stories in my own words, based on the versions I have heard, read, and in one case (“How Raven Stole the Sun”) even seen in the form of an animated TV show, while others I have been permitted to use as I have found them, if slightly edited, by the authors of the respective versions. The first and the fourth, “Raven and Mink Go Bear Hunting” and “Raven and Fog Woman” are nearly unaltered reproductions of accounts by Terry Coral Echo Hawk and Nathan Jackson, respectively, the second, “How Raven Stole the Sun”, is a rewrite by me, and the third, “Raven and the First Men” is a heavily edited melange of several stories with the “First Men” rendition at its core, based on a rather Victorian-style version published online by Barry McWilliams. The more I intervened with the original material, the less incoherent the story gets sometimes, because I was thriving for a logical sequence, whereas the “handed down” accounts tend to contain elements the origin of which may feel unclear, as, for example, the last paragraph in tale one, that abruptly brings in a new theme. The last story, “The Two Ravens”, that opens the concluding section of the book, has not even been inspired by Northwest Coast culture; it is a story that I had written years ago based on my own crude and orientalist ideas on African traditional folk-lore, which has been rewritten to fit into the scheme and tone of this book. To my knowledge, Raven never even had a sister...¹⁰

With this mix of adopted and reworked source material I have attempted to pay reference to the, musically speaking, feeling of the pieces, and the nonlinearity of cultural evolution, that for anthropologists is especially challenging to interpret, because there are so few straight lines to be fol-

¹⁰ According to Boas’ informant Ya’qolas he did; (Boas (1935), p.16, but that is another story.

lowed. In indigenous cultures myths have long been used as a means for education and the dissemination and preservation of knowledge and legal systems. Often these are not easily understood by outsiders.¹¹

Most importantly, however, is this: I have created the composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”; it may be based and thematically tied to Kwakwaka'wakw culture and contemporary reality, but it is my reality, my perspective, that is presented in the museum and elsewhere. Therefore it is only consequent that I also write the stories, everything else would be deceptive. They are also an integral part of my approach to (re-)presentation. They are the implemented affective turn that I herewith not only promote throughout this book, but also demonstrate by applying stylistic elements that resemble the storytelling techniques I found in the culture I am writing about.

Also, I do not follow the requirements of myth building or reproduction in the sense of a structuralism of Lévi-Straussian coinage, nor any literature studies methodology; as long as the story reads well, I shall be content. Although I strive to write in the spirit of the old Northwest Coast myths, I am of course aware that I can never even come close, nor replace the stories as they are told by the peoples themselves. Accordingly, I do not attempt to do so. These are my interpretations, and I hope not to offend anyone by publishing them. The same myths told by William Wasden jr., Beau Dick, or another individual member of the Kwakwaka'wakw or another Northwest Coast First Nation will always be genuine where mine are not.

As said above, the latter are part of the artistic and, what's more, atmospheric/affective approach I have chosen as communication strategy between my source collaborators and my audience. The same holds true for the soundscape composition that forms the central product of this dissertation. By keeping this as transparent as possible I hope to elude misinterpretation.

¹¹ See also World Three, First Voices section, subsection on Val Napoleon