

Sonic Archeology - An Approach to Sound Art and Composition: Origins, Enquiries and Methods.

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Abstract

Sonic Archeology is a concept in sound-art composition, especially but not exclusively for site-specific works, which helps in thinking through ways in which sounds from the past can be incorporated within contemporary sonic structures. Audio Verite and Mytho-poesis are identified as two possible approaches and both methods are briefly described in relation to my recent work, A Day of Hours. Techniques from the sonic archeological approach enable the past, through sound, to be brought into the present. In turn, this enables a pleasing synthesis between the eye and the ear in site-specific works, thereby offering a richer and more complete experience of place.

Origins

I was recently asked to create an electroacoustic sound installation for what I understood to be a specific site in Melbourne. I wanted the work to reference the site's present and its past. An important characteristic of *any* contemporary site is that the eye and the ear tell vastly different stories. In a city for example, while the architecture of a site immediately gives us a sense of its past, tellingly, if we use only our ears, we are catapulted into the exclusive present. The only exception is perhaps of the subtle resonance capabilities of specific, older building materials, as well as radio.

Enquiries

Searching for a concept to bring the sonic past into the present has led me to the term Sonic Archeology. I have chosen the term archeology, rather than history, because of its relevance: composers actually do 'dig' through the past, and in a certain sense, 'display' it, as part of both their compositional study and practice. As we know, the ability to 'dig-up' *actual* sonic materials from the past is limited to the last hundred years of recording. Earlier material must be re-created from historiography, recorded from old machines or objects from the past, or imagined, then created.

Any thoughts about what we mean by 'the past' must of course take into account cultural studies, which always asks not only from what perspective the history is taken: e.g. race, gender, indigeneity, class etc., but also insists upon articulating the biases inherent in *any* particular history's recording of itself.

No site exists without nature; therefore, the inclusion of nature's own voice is paramount. But nature's 'voice' is not neutral either and requires investigation into its history and also an acknowledgement of perspective orientation, (e.g. a geological or etymological perspective).

One normally thinks of archeology, as being concerned with the world outside the self – a kind of exterior focus. Sonic archeology differs in that it is as concerned with 'digging up' the outer sonic world as it is with 'digging up' an inner one from 'the self'. This is because no sound artist or composer comes to a new work without a deep, often unconscious 'sonification' of the self. Both psychological and spiritual history acknowledges the deep self is often unknown to the outer self. Yet it is the deep self that probably has the clearest link to the Zeitgeist - that mysterious 'now' that genuine artists everywhere make audible or visible.

Acoustic profiling - analyzing the site for its sonic properties

Since any particular site chosen for an electroacoustic sound art installation is already full of sound, the very first activity needs to be an acoustic monitoring of it. We need to ask: what local and distant sounds are present, what are they and how far away are they? What sounds occur only at specific times of the day, season, and year? What are the resonance and reverberation qualities of the site? What is the overall sound

level in both DBA and DBC? What are the keynote sounds and sound-marks? Are there masking frequencies present? A spectrogram of the site may be taken at various times of day, night and season. It is also important to consult with inhabitants within the acoustic profile of the installation because it will likely have a significant effect on those who experience it repetitively over time. After determining the acoustic profile of the present time, it is necessary to, through the imagination, consider the acoustic profile of the same site from a specific period in the past, or from more than one time period. Because of the function of noise pollution on acoustic profile is significant, these profiles from the past would be distinctly different from the present profile.

Methods: Approaching sonic material as Audio Verite

A site-specific sound installation that concerns itself with sonic archeology may be approached in at least two different ways. The first is what I call Audio Verite. Here, local, historical accuracy within the acoustic profile is paramount. If for example, one were to combine sound sources from historical bird song, indigenous voices, early building techniques, early transport, historical economic events such as a depression, and a variety of sonic snapshots of time past, it would be important to ascertain which of these activities actually took place within the acoustic profile of the site. In some places, historical birdsong would not include sparrows; local, rather than generic indigenous tribal practices would be crucial; early building techniques might be difficult to source - e.g. the tools required for stone cutting; the site may've been relatively untouched by a large economic event such as a depression because of its wealth; transport and other sound events would be colored/masked by the other sounds that are present as well as the resonant and reverent qualities of the area. One may even have to take weather into account, since it can have a dramatic effect on acoustic profile of both local and distant events. The researching, resourcing and recreating of sound sources for an Audio Verite approach that is true to the acoustic profile of the site is the most difficult part of this approach.

Methods: Approaching sonic material as Mytho-poesis

An alternative to Audio Verite is the Mytho-poetical approach. In this method, the crucial element from the past is a foundation story. Examples are religious foundation stories such as Christianity, political foundation stories such as the American Constitution or a natural foundation story such as the big bang theory. Obviously there are many others. Sounds that either explicitly relate to these stories, or relate symbolically to them, are then combined in a variety of ways to create new meanings, analogously to the way poets combine words and images to create new meanings.

A Day of Hours

My recent sound art installation - A Day of Hours, commissioned by RMIT Art Gallery, Melbourne, initially investigated an Audio Verite version. I talked to locals, both settlers and representatives of indigenous, recorded antique sounds and read widely. As a newcomer to Melbourne, this research helped me to get a sense of place. However, after a considerable amount of thought, (and action), I settled on a Mytho-poetical approach. The reasons for this were various, although the practical obstacles to obtaining sounds from the past that fitted its acoustic profile were significant.

In my attempt to allude sonically to the sense of the past given to city by its architectural history, I decided to use the Christian story as a foundation story, since I presumed that Christianity was common to many of the early settlers who designed the buildings. This coincided nicely with my own inner-self story, since I became Christian half way through my adult life. Alongside this foundation story, I also briefly refer to an epochal view of Melbourne settlement patterns created by artist Nadim Karam.¹ Nature's story was 'told' through bird song. A specially scored cello invoked the iconic Australian sound symbol, the didgeridoo.

¹ Designer of the Standridge bridge over the Yarra in the Melbourne CBD, who used colorful terms and images such as Gayip the aboriginal period; Melbourne beauty the goldrushes; Running couple, refugees; to capture the sense of the movement of peoples over time. (<http://www.hapsitus.com/hapsiflex.php#!sect=44&grp=4&id=1&pic=1>).

Assorted other sounds were used symbolically: electronica for modernity, different languages and multi-cultural voices for the waves of immigration; specific 'hammering' rhythms to indicate building - (both symbolically and literally). These were combined around a Bb pitch center and layered and ordered according to a large-scale temporal-wave structure.

The following sound-art techniques were used. The Christian story is invoked by using vocal fragments of the Gospel of John, (considered by some to be a rewriting of the Genesis story), in a semi-intoned Greek and Latin, premixed in multiple layers. Linear and cyclical movement through time is symbolized by sustained gong/vocal tones. Layered rhythmic electronica with a slightly 'tabla-eque' quality was created using Ableton live to give a sense of non-western settlement as well as cyclical time movement. A variety of rhythmic hammering or knockings were based on ancient Greek rhythms. These symbolize the university where I was working as well as the western idea of linear progress and were created electronically and with the 'cello. Vocal speech sounds outside of the Latin and Greek take two forms - either utterances based on the epochal settlement patterns of Melbourne as perceived by artist Nadim Karam; or 'thank-yous' in a variety of different languages. The final and very important layer, which symbolizes 'the present', is live radio. News from the top of the hour is captured, repeated and then granulated into an overall texture, in an asynchronous temporal relationship with all the other sonic material. Because the temporal-wave structure alternates dense intensity with subtle delicate quietness, the asynchronous, live-capture radio, either dominates or masks it. The work is fifteen minutes long, is to be played as a loop and is created for sixteen channel playback with a spatial configuration contrasting diffused sonic gestures with point-source sonic events.

Conclusion

Sonic Archeology as a concept for sound-art composition, especially but not exclusively in site-specific works, helps in thinking through ways in which sounds from the past can be incorporated within contemporary sonic structures. Audio Verite and Mytho-poesis have been identified as two possible approaches. In my recent work, *A Day of Hours*, both methods were considered at length before I settled on the latter. As mentioned before, the eye and the ear tell vastly different stories about both the present and the past, for any particular site. Concepts from sonic archeology enable the past, through sound, to be brought into the present. In turn, this enables a pleasing synthesis between the eye and the ear, thereby offering a richer and more complete perceptual experience of any site.

Susan Frykberg is a sound-artist/composer and poet who tries to balance chi-rho spirituality, creativity and social justice. Her works have been heard in Canada, the US, Europe, Asia and Australasia. In addition to her sound-art works, Susan composes for a variety of combinations of electroacoustics, instruments, and chant. Some of this work can be heard on her CD *Astonishing Sense*..... available from www.earsay.com and itunes. One work on it, for electroacoustics and violin, was performed at the Congress for the International Alliance of Women Musicians in Beijing in 2008. Susan has combined Gregorian chant with Ableton Live in the works *Salve Regina Electronica* - (New Zealand Electroacoustic Symposium at Auckland University 2009) and *Ubi Caritas Electronica* - (9th International Festival of Women Composers in Indiana, Pennsylvania, 2010). Other notable works include *Suffering*, for Ableton Live, giant shadow puppets, and live signal processing, (Australasian Computer Music Conference, Auckland, 2011). In 2010-11, Susan worked with improvising musicians who played a range of instruments from classical to indigenous to electronic, in an ensemble called *Let the Art Sing* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-Wwj6O4cFc>. They came together under Susan's direction to create structured improvisation around high quality art. During this time she also produced a semi-regular radio show for Radio New Zealand on electroacoustic music. She currently lives in Melbourne, where her spiritual and social justice leanings are satisfied by her work at Urban Seed, The Big Issue and the Carmelite Library, (coordinator of a spiritual reading group). She is a citizen of Canada and New Zealand and has degrees in experimental music and theatre, ancient languages, and theology. She is a member of the Canadian Music Centre, The New Zealand Music Centre (SOUNZ) and Socan, and was a founding member

of both The World Forum for Acoustic Ecology and the Canadian Electroacoustic Community. She is a research associate for Waikato University, NZ and teaches Acoustic Communication online for Simon Fraser University, Canada. Her music is available from earsay.com, itunes and http://www.electrocd.com/en/bio/frykberg_su/discog/