

## COMMENTARY

# Sound and Listening: Beyond the Wall of Broadcast Sound

Eric Leonardson

I have thought of listening as a discipline, a mindful state of awareness, something to learn, study, and practice—a skill that can be either acquired or lost. I have also questioned these assumptions. More than just paying attention, the literature (e.g., Blesser & Salter, 2007; Schafer, 1977, 1993) tells us listening practices are diverse and culturally determined. For the individual, listening happens on a continuum from the conscious to the unconscious (Truax, 2001). With radio and audio media playing a larger role than ever in the making and future of audio and listening cultures, we are at a crossroads. Even within a shared cultural background it is essential to avoid a totalizing definition, taking care to understand that every individual hears and listens differently.

Given the global reach of wireless communications it is increasingly urgent to grasp how media aesthetics, acoustic ecology, and everyday listening are interrelated. Over the past four years, I have engaged in an annual event called World Listening Day. What follows is a narrative account of how a small group of artists and scientists are using this day to publicly and openly engage and educate individuals and organizations about a fundamental yet often ignored aspect of our lives: the soundscape. This small group's reach has gone surprisingly far, indicating how sound, radio, and listening may open the imaginative space for positive change.

### Acoustic Ecology as Radio Ecology

Canadian composer, author, and music educator, R. Murray Schafer referred to broadcast radio as a continuous wall of sound. As the founder of the World Soundscape Project (WSP) and “father of acoustic ecology,” Schafer believed radio

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could be skillfully created as art, “show[ing] us alternative modes of living” (Schafer, 1977, p. 235). With fellow researcher Bruce Davis, Schafer called for a radically different kind of radio in the 1970s—“Wilderness Radio” for urban listeners who could tune in to the sounds and natural rhythms of life. “The plan was to put microphones in remote locations uninhabited by humans and to broadcast whatever might be happening out there: the sounds of wind and rain, the cries of birds and animals—all the uneventful events of the natural soundscape transmitted without editing into the hearts of the cities” (Schafer, 1993, p. 136).

While natural sounds and rhythms are disappearing because of anthropogenic impacts of population explosion, agriculture, etc., those sounds from any remaining “wilderness” can be transmitted more readily than before to distant listeners with Wi-Fi networks. Two examples are the Locus Sonus (2014) Streaming Audio Map and the Reveil (a 24-hour Dawn Chorus) by Grant Smith (2014). Similar such projects offer listening networks free of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulation, independent from large broadcasters, and open for engagement at the grass roots level.

The combined influence of technology, environmental changes, and Schafer’s interest in radio helped the spread of the WSP’s ideas, particularly with *The Tuning of the World*, published by Schafer in 1977. By 1993 interest grew to inspire the formation of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), an event I participated in and which propelled my current activity in radio and transmission arts, experimental music, and listening pedagogy.

## World Listening Day

Chicago-based artist, musician, and multi-arts advocate, Dan Godston came up with the idea of a world listening day in 2008, inspired by the pioneering work of Schafer. I was among a group of Chicago-based sound artists and phonographers who started the World Listening Project (WLP), a non-profit organization concerned with field recording, the importance of the art and science of environmental sounds, and the role of listening. In 2009, with interest amongst the local founders of the WLP, I started the Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology (MSAE), a membership organization and regional chapter of the American Society for Acoustic Ecology. Godston proposed that the WLP and MSAE start World Listening Day as a way “to draw attention to listening practices, acoustic ecology, soundscape awareness. . . .” (personal communication, April 9, 2009).

He noted that there was already a World Listening Awareness Month. However, its focus lacked environmental awareness. His proposal raised questions. How do we declare a global day of observance? What would it achieve? Would World Listening Day become merely a symbolic gesture as Earth Day had become? Should not listening and soundscape awareness be a daily concern, exercise, or pleasure?

With those concerns still unresolved, the first World Listening Day was announced on June 1, 2010. Through email, the WLP web presence, and social media, Godston

contacted as many people as he could. With less than two months before the date, the response was phenomenal. By this time, the WLP had already established a notable international network. People were, and still are, invited to “participate, observe, engage, and celebrate ways of listening with care for our sonic environment” (Leonardson, 2014).

The WLP began inviting as many people as possible to participate in World Listening Day, an annual glocal event held on July 18, the date of Schafer’s birthday. That first year, Godston surveyed participants to determine the type of events celebrated or observed (from soundscapes to soundwalks, to various private and public events), while also asking for data concerning the number of attendees, where these events were held, how they were organized, and how success was determined, among other information that might assist for future World Listening Days.

Each year the WLP invites individuals and organizations internationally to realize the following aims through soundwalks, concerts, radio broadcasts, and Internet audio streams:

- Celebrate the listening practices of the world and the ecology of its acoustic environments;
- Raise awareness about the growing number of individual and group efforts that creatively explore Acoustic Ecology based on the pioneering efforts of the World Soundscape Project, World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, La Semaine du Son, Deep Listening Institute, among many others;
- Design and implement educational initiatives that explore these concepts and practices.

World Listening Day is significant for its ability to attract global interest among people of diverse social, economic, generational, and ethnic groups. Audio media and broadcast radio are key to this development. The WLP and World Listening Day remind and connect us with communities of “web-mikers” and “soundwalkers” enabling listeners to be the broadcasters themselves, operating outside the narrow and limited formats of commercial and public radio. The WLP began in July 2008 with a confluence of people, many but not all in Chicago. Our backgrounds are in media art, experimental improvised music, music composition, and acoustic ecology. We are all interested in field recording. The newly available benefits of the web for hosting of global soundmaps, archiving, and streaming of recorded sounds, signaled that local interest was no longer isolated to its locality. Ecologies of sound and listening were now less bound by text and distance than ever before, more accessible for instant and global communication.

## Listening Around the World

The first World Listening Day extended the reach and knowledge of the World Listening Project many times over. The Internet was an essential tool for connecting

with others who globally shared the WLP's environmental concerns. The first World Listening Day enjoyed the direct involvement of more than 400 individuals on six continents. Given the volunteer efforts and its global reach, we have no exact data on how many others participated as listeners of radio and Internet audio streams, public and private soundwalks, or any other forms of engagement that first year.

What is certain is that upon founding the WLP, we gained the interest and support of many artists and environmental advocates. Many were drawn from backgrounds in media art, radio and networked sonic art, field recording and phonography, and biological sciences. Among them was Bernie Krause, the internationally respected bio-acoustician and author. With his wife Katherine, they are global advocates for preserving the disappearing natural soundscapes. Forty-five years of recordings from around the planet are archived and commercially available on their Wild Sanctuary Web site. In not a few cases, it includes recordings from animal habitats and natural soundscapes that are now extinct. Krause's books and appearances are reaching many across the arts and sciences and into popular consciousness.

From the start, Udo Noll from Germany remains a consistent voice and participant in the WLP activities. His aporee map is a massive archive and soundmap of over 15,000 recordings accessible online using, as many soundmaps do, the Google Maps Application Programming Interface (API). The project fits right in the WLP's interest in an open system for assembling field recordings from around the world. Each year Noll creates a special *sonic snapshot of the world* page with audio uploaded on World Listening Day.

Jérôme Joy, a renowned composer of networked music and sound art teaching at École Supérieure d'Art d'Aix-en-Provence, joined our effort with his Locus Sonus project. The Locustream soundmap, mentioned previously, uniquely provides real time sounds streaming on the Web, listenable from locations around the world. Conceived as a network of open-mikes, it offers anyone a participatory audio platform for sound art installations, radiophonic works, and live performances. Its non-hierarchical listening experience amplifies notions of global soundscape and media art. Like the aporee map, it also uses the Google Maps API to offer a visual interface for the listening experience.

## Implications

The first World Listening Day was a success for various reasons, some merely practical. For example, at the time I was visiting in Berlin and enjoyed meeting with young artists at their sound art gallery, Berg 26, and their esteemed teacher, Prof. Dr. Martin Supper at the Universität der Künste Berlin. World Listening Day was a perfect vehicle to increase interest in the gallery's project, coinciding as it did for its opening day. World Listening Day elevated and enhanced the public profile of their effort. Subsequently, World Listening Day served as an occasion for opening conferences. In 2012 The Global Composition in Dieburg, Germany and in 2014 Invisible Places | Sounding Cities opened that day. Both addressed sound,

media, urbanism, sense of place, global soundscapes, public art, acoustic ecology, and architecture. Other internationally participating organizers have found World Listening Day a compelling time to organize events. These included Yeung Yang with the Sound Pocket group in Hong Kong, Emeka Ogboh with Lagos Soundscapes in Nigeria, Claudia Wegner with Radio Continental Drift from Johannesburg, South Africa,<sup>1</sup> and Marcos Fernandes with Sounding Spaces in Tokyo, Japan, among many others. Luis Antero produces a World Listening Day show on Radio Zero in Portugal. Each year the broadcasts are compiled on an audio CD release distributed on Antero's Green Field Recordings' label. In 2013, the BBC Radio reported on World Listening Day, which also coincided with celebrations for Schafer's 80th birthday.

Notable participation came in 2011 from the Nature Sounds and Night Skies division of the United States National Park Service (NPS). Their Web site featured World Listening Day on its main page. Quoting from the NPS Web site (2014): "Our ability to see is a powerful tool for experiencing our world, but sound adds a richness that sight alone cannot provide. In many cases, hearing is the only option for experiencing certain aspects of our environment." It continues, "The symphony of natural sounds within our national parks is an important natural resource and a critical component of the ecological communities that parks seek to preserve. Understanding the role of sound and acoustics in a healthy ecosystem is critical to their effective management and protection" (NPS, 2014).

Schafer said that the sounds of an environment are an indicator of its health. When we stop listening the soundscape degrades—and so goes the environment. With the World Soundscape Project he led one of the first methodical, scientific studies of soundscapes in Canada and Europe. In his personal writings, such as *Voices of Tyranny: Temples of Silence* (1993), Schafer promoted a direct sensory approach, emphasizing the heuristic lest one become obsessed with meters and numerical measurements as an end in themselves, for sounds and cognition are complex phenomena. A decibel reading and visual notation of a sonogram have their uses, but tell us little about the listening experience. Trusting your ears first underlies his ethic. World Listening Day resonates with these core values.

## Podcasting the Mission

American sound artist Maile Colbert introduced me to the *Sounding Out!* sound studies blog and its Editor-in-Chief, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, Associate Professor of English, Binghamton University. In 2012, Stoever invited me to create a podcast about World Listening Day. Recruiting my fellow MSAE members Tom Haigh and Monica Ryan, we produced SO! Podcast Episode 7. It featured interviews with 11 people from Canada, Germany, Portugal, and the United States, who are highly respected and active in sound, listening, and the environment, including those previously mentioned as participants in past iterations of World Listening Day. In answer to the question "What is listening?," we learned from Pauline Oliveros, the pioneering American composer and founder of Deep Listening, that most people,

including cognitive scientists, still don't know what listening is. She said the question "is like asking what is consciousness? We still don't know" (*Sounding Out!*, 2012).

Our podcast focused on the role of field recording concern for our acoustic environments. In 2013 we began work on our second podcast for *Sounding Out!*. We interviewed Sabine Breitsameter and Barry Truax, two foremost authorities on acoustic ecology, threading the topic of the role of field recording with listening and environment. While only two interviewees, the task of communicating concepts less known in public media discourse such as globalization in the context of acoustic identity, soundscape composition, acoustic community, and listener recognizability posed a difficult writing challenge. In 2014, Episode 32 was posted in time for World Listening Day, concurrent with the opening day of Invisible Places | Sounding Cities, an international symposium on sound, urbanism and sense of place in Viseu, Portugal.

## Conclusion

What may World Listening Day hold for the future? I can imagine greater participation. However, we must all know *every day should be World Listening Day*. Perhaps a better question is: How do we make this sustainable, move past the symbolic gesture, and elevate understanding for individuals and social institutions both? Our planet is rapidly changing, most would agree. While bio-diverse soundscapes are disappearing, urban soundscapes grow evermore electroacoustic, and radio merges into a vast, expanding datascape, can market-driven media inspire listening to impact a changing world? Perhaps artists and sound designers as radio makers are needed to rethink radio, to show us how to allow sounds to be themselves, as John Cage proposed, to empower listening before words and music; heard and made differently, not as background to be ignored but as the meaningful flow of all life.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Wegner notes that July 18 is internationally commemorated as "Nelson Mandela Day" <http://radiocontinentaldrift.wordpress.com/2014/07/17/long-walk-abridged>.

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