

MotherVoiceTalk (2008) For Two Digital Soundtracks

By Hildegard Westerkamp

The making of *MotherVoiceTalk* was a journey in search of resonance with the work and life of the Japanese Canadian artist Roy Kiyooka. My task as I perceived it, was to listen to Kiyooka's artistic and personal voices on all possible levels and bring them into dialogue with the musical, sonic tools of my own compositional and personal voices. The final piece emerged out of this process of listening and was, to say the least, a bit of a surprise to me! Perhaps I could call it a "thought piece in sounds and words".

It was created within the context of *Marginalia, re-visioning Roy Kiyooka*, a project by Vancouver New Music. Three other B.C. composers, Jocelyn Morlock, Stefan Smulovitz, Stefan Udell and I were commissioned to compose works that would emerge out of a process of researching, getting-to-know, grappling with, and creating an inner dialogue with Kiyooka's diverse artistic output, which ranged from painting to sculpture, photography, poetry and other writing, film, video, and music improvisation.

From the start I was curious about the relationship between Kiyooka's Japanese-Canadian past—his coming of age during WWII and thus inside Canada's so-called enemy-alien culture and language—and his strong position inside the contemporary English-Canadian cultural scene during his adult life. Like so many other Canadians, myself included, he carried within himself another language and culture and learnt to integrate it into the cultural environment of the Canadian world around him. This makes for a unique inner dialogue and is bound to find its expression in any artistic work, however conscious or subconscious it may be.

Kiyooka's book *Mothertalk* (ed. Daphne Marlatt), created from interviews with his mother, accompanied me throughout the making of *MotherVoiceTalk*. Roy seemed to connect frequently and strongly with his mother in her old age, just as I have been connecting with mine for many years now—connecting in other words, with their powerful female presence in us, their stories and thus the language of our childhoods.

Listening to some of the tapes that Roy Kiyooka had made himself or that were made of his readings, musical improvisations and presentations, I was struck by the multitude of moods and expressions in his speaking and sound making. Short excerpts of these became the sonic/musical materials for this piece, e.g. sounds from his zither, or 'harp' as he would call it, from a whistle, and his spoken voice. The Japanese voice of his mother Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, and the German voice of my own mother, Agnes Westerkamp, both found their way into the composition.

Many thanks go to Giorgio Magnanensi and Vancouver New Music for setting up this impossible challenge and to Matsuki Masutani and Fumiko Kiyooka for unearthing some of Roy's recordings. And my special thanks go to Peter Grant, Margaret and Tom Taylor, Agnes Westerkamp with Renate Buck and Jolanta Penrak. They provided me with the places and times for retreat that I needed in order for this meeting between two artistic/personal languages to occur and *MotherVoiceTalk* to emerge!