

Breaking News (2002) For two-channel audio

By Hildegard Westerkamp

For C.

These are not so much programme notes than a series of thoughts that occurred while working on *Breaking News*.

My first grandchild was born two and a half months after September 11, 2001. Many children have been born since, breaking the news to us of birth and new life and thereby tipping the balance in our lives in favour of love and joy, rather than hate and terror. And still, the news of life in that sense is relegated to personal life and does not carry the same weight and importance in political and public life. It seems to have no bearing on the war actions of those in power or those vying for attention and power through crime and terror, whether they are politicians, terrorists or large corporations forcing their economic visions onto the world. Most broadcasting media play along with this view of what is important news: breaking news in the media tend to be preoccupied with death, war, crime, disaster, terror, not with birth and new life. And the loss of human life in these contexts becomes “collateral damage” in the language of those who cause the deaths.

This piece, *Breaking News*, is an attempt at a tiny balancing act by bringing into the forefront the sounds of new life—an embryo’s heartbeat, breathing, breastfeeding, a young baby’s voice, etc. These are sounds that we rarely hear in the media and yet they represent a most important driving force in our lives. They speak with energy and resilience, they tell us of vulnerability and how fragile life really is, they make us happy and sad, they speak with urgency, immediacy, with desperation, with joy, with need and desire. Every moment brings new information, every sound brings dramatic news of how this new life is growing into this world. The sounds tell us what is at any one moment.

September 11, 2001 had terrible news of death and destruction for us. Within less than 24 hours of the terror attacks in New York, many TV stations had created a visual logo, a headline and theme music to announce these breaking news with additional drama. Suddenly the terror attacks were being *produced* for TV, as if they were a movie. What was beginning to terrorize TV audiences in addition to the actual events was their fictionalization in the media. In this context I recall the story of a young child who asked her teacher why the airplanes were crashing into the high rises again and again and again.

Breaking News attempts to comment on all of this and at the same time carries irony in its very core. The sounds of new life are produced into a radio event, framed by sounds that seek attention, and that dramatize—not unlike the way in which CNN produced the war in Afghanistan, supplied by George Bush with various misleading titles and headlines such as “Enduring Freedom.” *Breaking News* also is a media production, with a title and a dramatized soundscape—but this time around the sounds of new life. It also wants to stir and unsettle the listener with its sounds, change the pace of regular radio broadcasting. It also wants to surprise. In other words it tries to do the same as the regular media. But it refuses to transmit feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Instead it wants to energize, revitalize. It celebrates new life, love, human warmth and energy in the media framework of “breaking news.”

Many thanks to Sonja Ruebsaat and Luke Martin for recording their first newborn and for generously allowing me to include the sounds of first day-of-life breastfeeding, of breathing, crying, gurgling, early vocal sounds, and laughing. Now, twenty years later, this same grandkid has given their own permission to my use of their early voice and soundmakings in this composition.

Breaking News was commissioned by CBC Radio for its September 11 special programming.