

Gently Penetrating
beneath the sounding surfaces of another place (1997)
for two-channel audio

by Hildegard Westerkamp

The vendors' voices in this composition were recorded in specific areas of New Delhi during my first visit in 1992: in the residential area of Janakpuri, at the early morning produce market in Tilak Nagar, at the market near the Jama Masjid, and at the market stalls just off Janpath near Connaught Place. I noticed that many of the other sounds in these places besides the vendors' voices were those of metal (such as buckets falling over, cans rolling, the handling of metal pots, squeaking gates, sometimes unidentified objects rattling or clinking as they pass), bicycle bells and scooter horns. As they seemed to be rather characteristic sonic "accompaniments" to the environments through which the vendors passed or where they had their stalls, these sounds became major players in the composition.

Coming from a European and North American context, I was delighted by the daily presence of the vendors' voices. As the live human vending voice has disappeared almost entirely in Northern Europe and North America and has largely been replaced by media advertising, it is somewhat of a miracle for the visitor from those areas to hear such voices again. The gruffer, coarser shouting of male voices seemed to occur in markets near noisy streets or where a lot of voices were competing with each other. The vendors moving through quieter neighbourhoods seemed to have musically more expressive voices and almost songlike calls for their products, with clear melodic patterns. And then there was the voice of the boy selling juice...

In a city like New Delhi, and other places in India, one experiences shimmering beauty and grungy dirt and pollution side by side all the time. Many of these opposites are audible in my recordings as well and specifically in the sound materials selected for this piece. I wanted to express acoustically / musically both the shimmering and the grunge as it seems to represent so deeply and openly the contradictions within this culture and the intensity of life that results from it.

Finally I believe that this piece also explores outer and inner worlds as one experiences them in India: the extraordinary intensity of daily living on the one hand and the inner radiance, focus and stillness on the other hand that emanate from deep within the culture and its people, despite the hardships of life.

I would like to thank Savinder Anand, Mona Madan, Arun Patak, Virinder Singh, and Situ Singh-Bühler for taking me to the places where these vendors' voices occurred. Without their help and local knowledge I would have had a difficult time capturing them on tape. Many thanks go to Max Mueller Bhavan for inviting me to New Delhi in the first place and giving me the opportunity to work with the Indian friends and listen to this city. I am grateful to Peter Grant for being a compassionate and listening companion throughout this time.

The piece was commissioned by and realized in the studios of the Institut International de Musique Electroacoustique/Bourges, France and received an honorary mention in the Prix ars electronica competition in Linz Austria, 1998.

Length: 14:00