

Like A Memory (2002) for piano and two-channel audio

By Hildegard Westerkamp

This composition explores that area of aural perception in which we hear music in sounds and sounds in music, where scrap metal structures become musical instruments and the piano becomes a strange sound sculpture.

Many things came together in this composition. In 1985 I took my tape recorder and microphone and walked along Slocan Lake in the interior of British Columbia, Canada, to an abandoned old house I had discovered some days before. Among the few remains inside was a piano. Many strings had broken, pieces of wood, some rusty nails and wires were lying among the strings, and rats had nested in its sounding board. Some keys were missing and of the remaining ones, not all keys were working. I had found a “prepared piano” in the deepest Cagean sense and delighted in improvising on this “instrument” and recording the sounds that emerged. I also played and recorded snippets of classical music that I remembered from piano lessons years ago. They sounded delightfully out of tune and “off”.

In 2000 I went back to the same region with photographer Florence Debeugny to collect sounds and images for a project on ghost towns called *At the Edge of Wilderness*. Fallen down buildings and rusty metal structures became soundmaking devices as I moved through the abandoned industrial sites, “playing” on anything and everything and finding the most fascinating resonances. Whether the sounds came from an old steam engine or an out-of-tune piano with broken strings, they have become the musical instruments for *Like A Memory*.

The majority of the sounds for the piece—the natural sounds, soundmaking on the rusty structures, or our footsteps and spoken voices— were recorded on the ghost town sites themselves. Recordings of steam trains and of old machinery come from the environmental sound archives of the *World Soundscape Project* at Simon Fraser University.

A short time after I had completed *At the Edge of Wilderness* pianist Jamie Syer contacted me to see whether I was interested in composing a piece for piano and environmental sounds. I suggested that perhaps one could do something with my old recordings from the abandoned house with the piano and from the ghost towns. It turned out that Jamie knew this area of B.C. very well and taught piano every summer during the Valhalla Summer School of Music in Silverton, B.C., a small community right in the middle of this area. How could we not do a piano work together after the convergence of so many strands and experiences!

Some of the other excerpts of classical piano music that appear on the digital soundtrack of the piece were played by Jamie Syer and recorded by myself at his home near Calgary, Alberta, in May of 2002.

Like A Memory was commissioned by Jamie Syer and the Valhalla Summer School of Music and was composed with financial assistance from the Vancouver Foundation. It was premiered in Silverton, B.C.—in the area from where all sound materials originated—on August 16, 2002

Length: 11:21