

PAUL STEENHUISEN



Sonic



Mosaics



Conversations with Composers





Hildegard Westerkamp

JUNE 2004

HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP was born in 1946 and raised in Osmabrück, Germany, emigrating to Canada in 1968. Since then, she has lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, where she taught at Simon Fraser University, and has served on the boards of World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, and the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology. Since her early involvement with the World Soundscape Project in Vancouver, Westerkamp has been listening closely to the world around her—working with it, and for it. She is a composer, radio artist, lecturer, sound ecologist, and adventurer, as well as a pleasure to speak with.

ps: If you could remove any sound from the world, what would it be?

hw: Motor sounds.

ps: For me it would be signal sounds, like cell phones.

hw: Yes, there are those types of signals, and there is also the train one, which I love. But I think that the problem with these sounds has to do with the continuous droning of modern society, which doesn't give us access to silence. I don't mind sound stimulation or loud sounds once in a while, but it has to do with the balance between the absolute silence that we can experience and the energizing stimulation that sound can give. Even muzak, the ongoing music that we hear, is to me like a motor sound. It doesn't allow us to go deeper into a silent state.

ps: In twenty years, what sound of today will be absent?

hw: I think there will be animal sounds that will be absent, but I wouldn't know specifically which ones. The really morose part of me thinks that the wilderness sounds that we have in Canada will be absent in many more places. I hope there will be enough wilderness left, in the vastness of Canada, to be able to experience it for days on end, but that possibility is shrinking more and more. I'm not saying that we can't find silent places. I'm always astonished in Europe that you can find quiet at night that is much quieter than anything here in Vancouver. In many older places, like India or Egypt, and parts of Europe, you can still find these nooks and crannies with quiet, and perhaps even sacred quiet.

ps: What is the quietest place you've ever been?

hw: Camping in northern BC, around Prince Rupert, but also the Zone of Silence in northeastern Mexico. I was there with a group of artists for three weeks in the eighties, and that was probably the longest time that I experienced quiet, without any kind of motor sounds. There were no cars, and I heard only two jets during that time. It was called the Zone of Silence because it has a particular magnetic quality that creates places in the area where technology won't function. Batteries will empty, and you can't make photographs or recordings. Acoustically, it is also a very quiet place, but the name stems from the fact that you can't communicate with the outside world if you're in these spots within it. You knew you were going to be completely on your own there, and not disturbed by any form of contemporary life, including the media. The silence from media and commercialism is

an incredible rest, and I experienced an incredible alertness there that is very difficult to access in the daily life that we lead now.

ps: What is the loudest place you've ever been?

hw: In terms of decibels, I've been in factories that are excruciatingly loud. I remember going into the bottling section of a brewery here in Vancouver, where the motor noises and the clinking of the glass on the conveyor belt were unbelievably noisy. But when it comes to loud sounds in terms of continuous business around you, and the continuous output of sounds that are social sounds, and part of the way the society runs, I would think India is the loudest place I've been. You are constantly barraged there, with something coming from all sides. That could include voices talking to you all the time, people always coming up to you, traffic, car horns, beggars... life comes at you relentlessly.

ps: What drew you to India?

hw: Nothing drew me there, in fact, and I always had a fear of going there, but I was invited by the Goethe Institute to do a soundscape workshop in New Delhi, and couldn't resist the invitation. I got thrown into an environment that was very foreign to me, and I laugh when I think of it, because it was so extreme. I brought recordings, sound examples, and my experience in soundscape work and trust in the listening that I do. The Goethe Institute didn't really know what they were getting, either. To me, it was a meeting of resources. I came with what I had, and they came with India, their knowledge of the culture and the city, and I began with that premise, each meeting what the other could bring to it. But it was chaos, from my perspective.

The first problem was how we would stay together as a group and meet, because people in India are not really prone to forming groups. They're very individualistic; I would say "creative anarchists." Groups don't really stick together. But they were very engaged in it, and there was a great deal of curiosity about what I was speaking about, because it was very new there. To ask someone in Indian society to listen to daily life and open his or her ears to what is going on there is much more of a challenge than I knew at the time. They have an incredible ability to not listen, and focus in on what they need to. They're very strong in terms of listening to their inner voice, and to what is necessary at that moment, rather than listening to the environment around

them, because the environment around them is so difficult to listen to.

PS: So for them, not listening was a way of coping with their environment.

HW: Yes, and it's a way of focussing in on what's essential. But it's taken me some years to understand this. I now understand why it was so difficult to take them on soundwalks. They would simply not be quiet. In a way, it is socially rude to walk through New Delhi as a silent group, and not engage. I'm only now beginning to understand this much more deeply, because I'm doing a lot of soundwalks in different cultural contexts, and it's different in each location. What does it mean to take a group through a different social environment and ask them to listen to their home environment? It's quite complex. Here in Canada there's nothing strange about that, but in other cultures, there is.

PS: Isn't closing off from one's sonic environment the opposite of your goal?

HW: I'm not sure whether I have a goal in that regard. Over the years, having many international experiences with this, I've become much more humble about what I think is important about listening. Initially, when I started with the World Soundscape Project, it was very much an environmental issue to me, a noise pollution issue. We listened to the environment because we wanted to find out what we were doing to it. We wanted to know why we are putting so much noise into the environment. The courage of Murray Schafer to ask us to open up our ears to noise pollution and find out what it means, I think it's a big, courageous thing to do. We're then facing the dark side of society, the side that is more destructive and doesn't pay attention to what we do with this kind of noise—to ourselves and the environment. It was an ecological question.

Over the years, having been in different cultures, it became more complicated. India really turned me around in that way. The noise pollution problem in India is way worse than it is here. The luxury of making machinery quieter economically doesn't exist there. So, you have to find ways of creating a lifestyle that protects you from that. The religious environment, the ritual environment, the temple, the practice of meditation, is what provides that. The practice of meditation is that you're not going to ignore the noise pollution, but you're

going to include it in the sense that you know that it's there. It passes through, as you meditate. The aim, of course, is to find stillness.

India has shaken up all of my experience of what is right and wrong, and what is good and bad. I can't, now, easily say that urban noise is bad. We have it, it's there, and that's the reality. I can now also never say that silence is good, because we know that the silence people experience in an empty life, without a social context, is worse than the worst noise. We know that from the Western world, and it's something that the Indian people don't know so much, and they're lucky. There is a type of happiness and encouragement towards life there.

PS: A number of times you've mentioned stillness, and said, "Of course, the goal is stillness." What do you mean by that?

HW: Personally, I enjoy the space of mind that is connected to the world in a way that comes from an inner calm and sense of love. It's what we experience when we create a composition. You know that moment when you are composing and everything in you says "Yes"? You've got it, and everything resonates.

PS: Those are good days.

HW: (*Laughing*) Yes, and the rest are torture! But that feeling is what I'm talking about. That is an inner stillness while, at the same time, everything vibrates. You're in resonance with what has just happened. I think it's the same as the sound in a temple bowl, which resonates just in that space, and has a stillness in its sound.

PS: You said that we have noise pollution, and that's the way it is, but at the same time, there is activism in your thinking.

HW: It's an area of conflict for me, actually. I started out very much as an activist, and was involved with fighting the expansion of the airport at the time, and being involved with the new noise bylaws, et cetera. That part is still there, but it has not stayed on the level of the concrete daily activism. It has moved into an educational arena, where soundwalks are an activist thing. You're taking people out into your environment and noticing what goes on. I've noticed that the effect of that is quite powerful. Most people are touched by it. The activism that can come from it is the important part. Because they have noticed things on the soundwalk, they can go and change things in their own life, in their own community. I am in constant conflict between the part of me that wants to fight the noise, and the person who wants to

work on the not-so-obvious activist level that you can influence the world by how you yourself work and listen.

PS: So it was external and now it's more internal?

HW: It's definitely that...

PS: With a bit of noise between the two.

HW: (Laughs) Yes. People notice you listening and experiencing things all the time. It always rubs off on them.

PS: What happens on a soundwalk?

HW: It's not just going on a walk; it's deciding to listen to everything that meets your ears. And I now include listening to one's inner voice also, as it distracts you, and takes you from the outer world. You can do it by yourself, with your children, or with an organized group. We've done it with groups of three through to groups of sixty-five. The only rule is that one is not to speak. I present it as an opportunity to be in a group that does not communicate on a word level. My idea starts with experiencing your own sound environment. I find the soundwalks are always creative moments. Ideas spring up no matter what. Soundwalks create a relationship with the environment and the people, creating a connection between listener and environment. Deep down, that is my interest in everything I'm doing with sound. Knowing the relationship, understanding the relationship, and deepening the connection. That's why you want to include your inner world. That's where the creative source is.

PS: Most of the composers I speak with deal with pitches and rhythms and notes on paper. Soundscape composition is so different.

HW: I created soundscape compositions at a time when that term didn't exist. The pieces I made had to do with experiences in life. The first piece I did in this way was called *Whisper Study*, and it came out of my work with the World Soundscape Project. At that time, I was very concerned with the idea of silence and what it means. I had never really thought about it in my life, and I was experiencing it in a new way. I began to do some studio work, and I decided I wanted to explore the voice, so I recorded my whispered voice saying the sentence, "When there is no sound, hearing is most alert." To me, this captured all of the philosophical thinking around silence. I'll have an idea for a piece, and the sounds that will be involved in it, from the place that is connected to it, or the theme of the work. Then I get into the nitty-

gritty of pitch, rhythm, and things that composers think about, and I'm then in complete shock (laughs).

PS: What do you mean?

HW: It's at that point that I'm getting to know the material in a different way; to know the instruments that I'm working with. Maybe it's the same thing that every composer goes through in the end, when it becomes concrete.

PS: Yes and no, because the themes and the characters in your work are unpredictable sounds that you've documented yet don't control.

HW: That's right. To me, this is the essence of soundscape composition, in that you don't ever know what is going to come out in the piece. I think soundscape composition is an extreme case of not planning a piece in a nitty-gritty way. What happens is that when you take a recording and begin to process the sound of it, every recording behaves completely differently. It depends on the angle of the microphone, et cetera.

PS: It's similar to getting to know materials for acoustic composition, but the process of obtaining the materials in soundscape composition may be less isolated, and more open.

HW: It's that connection with making the recordings—experiencing the place, having lived in the place—that makes it fascinating to me. It's very inclusive.

PS: Who is your audience?

HW: I think that my audience is not the regular contemporary music audience. My pieces are played in that context, but I feel that there is also an audience that comes from people who aren't involved in contemporary music. Recording technology, and the fact that everyone can listen to things through headphones has created an enormous interest in the soundscape work, because people are listening with the microphone ear that searches for sound.

PS: Does the interest in soundscape composition make you feel optimistic about the sound environment?

HW: Not really. People often listen to recorded sound more than to their own direct hearing of sound. The microphone and the loudspeaker have become very important aspects of this society, and have the capacity to cover up what our own ears and voices can do. It can have a debilitating effect on hearing and human sound-making.

ps: Is this an admission of defeat?

HW: In a way. It's blocking it out and making a so-called better world.

It's no longer clear what is precious. Everybody can document the world now, and a lot of it claims to be soundscape composition, but the aspect that is missing is that of *relation*—and the compositional aspect.

In my darkest moments, I think that what is forgotten is Schafer's initial inspiration of "What are we doing to our world?" We have so many recorded sounds now that we don't have enough time to listen to them, let alone to the world around us.