

Chapter 4

The same trail twice

Talking Rain with Hildegard Westerkamp

The artist's aesthetic musical language and the language of the recorded sounds and soundscapes meet in the process of composing. And it is the meeting of the two 'languages' and the ways in which they are balanced that makes out the creative challenge in a soundscape composition. It is not unlike a traveller's encounter with a new place. The journey itself becomes the point of balance between the traveller's own inner reality and how he or she meets the new place.
(Westerkamp, 2002, p. 54)

Hildegard Westerkamp's composition, *Talking Rain*, invites a listening journey through the sounds of water, rain and West Coast birds and animals in British Columbia. Some of the sounds she uses as her material in this work were collected in Lighthouse Park, a wooded promontory overlooking Burrard Inlet, near Vancouver. This chapter is based on an interview I recorded with Westerkamp,¹ as we walked in Lighthouse Park itself. Three days of solid rain had soaked the ground, but the weather cleared up just long enough for us to enjoy an exhilarating meander through muddy paths, and up and down rainwater creeks and gullies.

Writing is a path that leads to sound and, although lightly edited, this writing tries to hold on to the natural rhythm of our speech as we walked along together. Sometimes the trail runs through the 'ums' and 'ahs', the half-articulated thoughts and the incomplete sentences that are left abandoned along the way in normal conversation. Occasionally we just ran out of breath, or stopped to think, or to listen for a moment.

Indeed, during the course of our conversation we got a little lost. We found ourselves on a new trail, or rather what turned out to be a familiar trail approached from an unfamiliar direction. But perhaps that temporary strangeness was a gift that made the whole walk seem fresh and unusual. This is the way with talking, listening and being in another place.

The sound examples are taken from our walk, and from *Talking Rain* itself.

HW: You can hear it on the headphones?

KN: I wasn't hearing it but ... yes, that's fine.

HW: OK.

KN: Yes, that's actually quite loud ...

KN: *Is this where you made Talking Rain?*

HW: Yes, a producer on the CBC wanted me to do a piece about rain because they were doing a whole hour of a sort of 'West Coast rain' programme. And so he approached me and said, 'Can we can we make this composition, and can we be part of your recording process?' And so, that winter it happened that it wasn't raining very much, and the three of us were trying to find a *day* where we could go out *here* to Lighthouse Park and record rain ... together. And ...

KN: *The weather didn't oblige!*

HW: The weather did absolutely not oblige! And in the meantime I had made my own rain recordings, and I collected together some old recordings that I had. So I had the material. But we just couldn't get to this *day*. So, finally, we just made a date and said 'Let's go to Lighthouse Park'.

And on that morning it rained. And we arrived, and it rained for about another ten minutes and then it stopped! (laughs) ... so we got this ... actually we walked down this same trail.

(We arrive at a clearing in the wood, and stop walking to look around)

HW: Isn't that incredible?

KN: *Green. There are so many different greens there ...*

HW: Yes, it's the moss.

KN: *The benefit of rain ...*

HW: It's just that. I love this place because to me it's the only forest near Vancouver that has some inkling of the rain forest of the West Coast ...

(resume walking)

So we were trying to get some of the rain sounds on these different soft

Meander ... the same trail

① CD[15]

An April afternoon, after much rain. Lush, verdant forest and blustery, unexpected sea views. A landscape of trickling, rain-fed streams and cool, saturated air. All these provide the setting, and the reason to go on.

We are walking down the same trail that Hildegard took to record sounds for her piece, *Talking Rain*. On that occasion she was accompanied by colleagues from CBC Radio, but during the course of our walk she also describes other times when she has come here with visiting relatives, her mother or with friends. So this is a familiar journey for her, and one that has its own stories along the route. For me it's another place.

While we walk along, negotiating sodden paths and the ups and downs of a rocky terrain, I ask her questions about how she made her piece. My questions prompt responses that involve her going back along old paths. 'How did you do this?', 'Where did you go?' I am listening, and at the same time imagining her memories for myself. And while my journey is more than partly to collect new information, Westerkamp's own walk is also a journey down memory lane. At the same time we are two friends trudging along together. We occupy different places, simultaneously.

And sound? We're making it up as we go along. You can hear our feet.

The boots squelching on wet ground, and the slight changes that indicate our encounters with stones, bumps, and a slippery moment or two. There's the sound of the microphone knocking against my hand or body as we walk, and the movement of clothing – trousers, jackets, sleeves. There is a great deal of sonic activity and yet, if asked, you would deduce that this was recorded in a quiet place. Because all you can hear is our voices and the rhythm of our walking in an enclosed, still atmosphere. Yes, we were shielded by tall trees and the atmosphere was also quite overcast and windless. But, also, the recording itself was a little composed: the microphone is directional

surfaces, as opposed to the urban, hard surface raindrops ... So they ... there's all this moss here and the different cedar branches and the leaves and ...

KN: *You can smell it.*

HW: Exactly. So, we ended up recording this particular walk here and then we also found a creek. And we walked up the creek and did recordings there, and we did it in a way

... I had the microphone in the hand. I had one pair of headphones and the technician had the other pair of headphones and he had the machine so he controlled the levels, but I was leading them, with the microphone. So I was just zeroing in on certain water sounds and things.

And then we'd have conversations in between. So it was like a soundwalk really, with them. And then part of those recordings became materials for the piece. But the producer made – they recorded, they cut – a soundwalk out of it for the programme. So they had the soundwalk that we did in Lighthouse Park as part of the programme.

KN: *With you talking?*

HW: With me talking and us having a conversation and discussing soundscape and rain and the West Coast and this place, and what was special about this place.

KN: *Talking Rain is very much, for me, a piece that's not just about rain.*

HW: Mmm, no ...

KN: *It's about place. It feels like a foreign visit for me, listening to it.*

HW: Yes ... like going into a different place. Yes, and it made me very aware of how different rain is in every place.

and I chose to hold it close to us. We – sounding, sonic, human objects – are filling a place that the microphone defined. And while the microphone picks up our activity, it also excludes the fine detail of our surroundings. A recording never offers quite the same trail as having been there yourself.

But is being there a problem? Do we get in the way? Is our conversation an intrusion within the natural soundscape, or is it even more – is it an eradication perhaps?

Listening is a silent intelligence that directs us to what we think matters. And what matters occupies our attention. Here, I have directed the listening microphone towards what matters to me. I want it to matter to you. I am holding the microphone towards her voice as we walk along.

It appears you have no choice but to hear my intention. Am I a composer? Or are we listeners together – following the same trail? Have I invaded your space? Several things are taking place. It is difficult not to sound rather pretentious, because we are not given to talking about sound and its place in our lives.

It is an interesting mix.
Sound, listening and composition.

HW: Now, I just realized we went a different route here, but that's OK ... there's one place that we should have gone ... the other ... but this is fine ...

HW: This is fine here. I don't know where it will lead us but ...

KN: *We shall see.*

HW: I notice that in Europe, for example, you have rain ... but you don't have the kind of continuous rain, that you have here.

KN: *No, I associate that very much with North America.*

HW: Yes – I mean it just doesn't *stop*, right!? And, on the West Coast here, you can have just continuous rain for days and days and *days*. And so you have a type of lushness that you just don't get in Europe. And, in Europe, I notice, it's very much that a day will be

interrupted with certain rhythms of rain showers. And I remember as a child that I knew that I probably would need some kind of rain cape during the day. I had to take it with me even though the sun was shining. Or you'd have to stop your bike ride ...

Meander ... hearing place

Ⓛ CD[16]

A sea-plane passes overhead as we are talking. Although Hildegard's voice is in the foreground – the microphone is pointing at it – the plane's sound is still an interruption. The background looms forward and halts our train of listening. Things cannot proceed in the way you hope when other sounds have claimed attention.

'Can you hear them?'

Listening to this sound clip now, her looped voice becomes a pattern with an interesting lilt. Perhaps vocal repetition tends to catch our ears because it is relatively unusual in normal, uncontrived circumstances – in particular when the sound is of human origin. The rhythm of her

and you'd just have to ...

KN: *Yes, yes ... be prepared!*

HW: Yes!

HW: This is a typical sound.

We have the very high ... peeping sounds of the birds that are way up in the trees. Can you hear them?

KN: *Yes, very quiet.*

HW: They're very quiet and then you have the sea-planes – that's Lighthouse Park.

speech becomes structured; but it was already – there was a listening 'beat' of 'silence when she asked that question.

The answer to 'Can you hear them?' is preceded by a space in which action is required. During that beat of silence I am straining my ears to hear the birds singing way up above us. I am trying to hear what she hears. I am trying to get inside her head. But actually I can barely locate these other sounds while the drone of the sea-plane captures my attention.

'That's Lighthouse Park.'

We are foreign bodies in this landscape. Two intrigued non-natives exploring a different place (although she has been here quite a while) and finding it somehow essentially different from the paths we knew before. And yet it's hard to put your ear to the difference – the wind, the overhead hum of the sea-planes, and high treetops occupied by small birds of an unknown breed. We make comparisons between a place we remember and a new place.

KN: *How tall are these trees would you say?*

HW: ... these are not even really very big trees. I don't know, I can never tell the height, but they're a lot higher than most of the trees in Europe, right?

KN: *I was just thinking that the tallest waterfall in England is about 110 feet ... rather sad compared to these trees!*

HW: True, true! Yes, and there's quite a cliff there right, and the tree goes right above it.

(We resume walking)

HW: You know the piece made me much more aware in detail of the difference between where I grew up and here, in terms of the rhythms of the rain, and the sounds of it. And there's also, of course, the urban and nature aspect in that piece as well; you have the sound of rain on concrete, and a car going through the rain and ...

KN: *That's a big surprise, when the sound of the car driving through rain arrives.*

HW: Well I had a problem doing this piece, I thought, 'My God how do I do a piece that's about rain for the radio, without it sounding like something else, like fire or whatever?' So I had one recording that I'd made around a friend's house: it was raining hard that night and I said, 'Can I just come over and just come round your house and

record under the roof?' And so I spent about an hour recording all these detailed sounds around her house – she lived in a very forested environment. And there was one recording, where a

Meander ... in time

① CD[17] opening of *Talking Rain*

It appears to take the lightest touch – just a few steps down the path between a recording and composition – to turn a documented landscape into a new journey. It's a matter of surreptitiously offering a new approach, one that a listener might come across while passing through familiar territory. You know it, you could swear you'd been there already, but you can't quite place the difference.

At the opening of *Talking Rain* there is the sound of tapping rain on a roof in the foreground. It traces one, recognizably musical, path through many

raindrop went down onto a plastic ... er ... garbage can and it went ... *Ta ta ta ta, Ta ta ta ta, Ta ta ta ta* ... and that's the beginning of the piece. I thought I've got to establish that we're in a composition here!

(Laughs)

KN: *That's something I've thought about a lot with your work, actually. Also in Gently Penetrating into Another Place you establish a rhythm with a tapping sound. And it is to do with saying that 'this is music', isn't it?*

HW: It is. Because I'm continually worried that nobody notices that I'm composing!

other water sounds. Its rhythm invites other sounds to join it as music. And yet this rhythmic musical tapping is also merely the sound of rain on a roof. Indeed, the air is saturated with the sound of falling water. Listen to the rain – or rather to its results, since this is not the sound of a stormy downpour or even a misty shower. This is the sound of water running across roofs, dripping down drainpipes, splashing into gullies. This is the active, descriptive poetry of rain's downward travel. This is Hildegard Westerkamp's composed response to what rain means, to us.

The tapping is a structural signpost that's hard to avoid and easy to become attached to. My toes twitch in time as *Talking Rain* begins. When that rhythm fades, it does so to make room for the unmistakable sound of a car driving through rain. The foreground sound of wet tyres on tarmac is an unequivocal reference. Like the overhead sea-plane that clouded my listening in Lighthouse Park this sound approaches, takes over, and simultaneously defines the essential nature of the environment.

By the time that car's travel has faded, the tapping pattern has become subsumed under a looser 'close-up' layering of unambiguous water sounds. The sound is naturalistic but magnified. It is nearer than usual to my ears. A dripping splatter now becomes a resilient thread of continuous sound. And, as this episode fades, the tapping sounds resurface, renewed by an additional repeating pattern.

Direction. Invitation. Suggestion. Question. Intervention. Infiltration. Interpretation.

These are just some of the compositional activities that tap away at our listening to the strangely familiar. It is how these sounds are put together – composed – rather than how they are changed that leads us lightly down a different path. I know this sound, but something's not ... quite ... the same.

HW: I don't know this trail; this is great. This is a new place for me here ...

HW: Yes, so in *Talking Rain* it became really conscious. I've done it in other pieces but here I suddenly thought I've got to establish that we're in a rainy environment, plus that this is a composition. So that's why the car comes in there, quite early on – because it sounds *so* wet that I thought everybody would recognize it as rain, as a wet environment. That's why.

KN: *So it's not so much a political statement at that point?*

HW: No, not really, no. I mean, it can do that too ... but it led me then into that other section, later, in the city. It made me think that I'd like to go into the city as well. Because the urban environment in rain is such an absolutely different place, and people often hate it, whereas in the natural environment you actually enjoy it, don't you?

KN: *Yes ... except that we are walking down a stream at the moment; I don't know how much I'm enjoying that with a dat machine!*

HW: And I don't actually know where we are ...

KN: *Well ... there's human life down there*

(We stop to listen)

HW: *This is great*

KN: *I should be recording this.*

HW: *You want to?*

KN: *I don't hear much ... (pause walking to record)*

HW: *There's something up there, it might come down here*

KN: *And in Talking Rain, you started with a stereo piece, but then made it into a 'larger space', for eight-channel sound?*

HW: Yes, someone invited me to do an eight-channel composition and I ended up not having time to do a new piece. And so I proposed that I would try to make this piece into an eight-channel work. And I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. It's really difficult to do, very difficult. It's certainly much better to compose directly for eight channels, because it's a totally different thing from stereo. But it helped me to learn a lot about it.

HW: ... look at that!

(A large fallen tree bridging a small ravine)

KN: *I don't think I can do that!*

HW: No, no, we don't want to go across, it's too slippery. I fell off a log like that with the Nagra tape recorder once, because it took me out of balance. This was on the West Coast when I was two months pregnant ... And I fell on my head, it was awful ... but, Sonja's fine!

We had a big storm here – was it last winter or the winter before? – I think it was the winter before. It was a huge storm and that's when some of these trees fell over and had to be cut.

HW: Yes, when we were recording sounds for *Talking Rain* – when it stopped raining we went to waterways ... and I can hear some sound right now ...

(Sound of feet in water)

KN: *Here you go.*

HW: Mmm, there it is. A little waterfall.

(Sound of waterfall and KN moving a microphone over it)

KN: *I'm learning!*

HW: Yes, you go really slow. You can just really go very, very close ...

(sound of very close miked water) and if you just move like a little bit ... (sound of water and overhead plane too, in distance)

KN: *So you would normally record in this compositional way?*

HW: Yes because I don't see it as composition, I see it as listening: it's incredibly fascinating. And the first time I had an experience like this was in a village where there was a creek like this. I heard all these flicking sounds and I didn't know where it was. So, with the microphone, I went searching for it. And I ended up finding just a little branch of a leaf, like the stick ... what is it, the leaf 'handle'? (Laughs)

The water was kind of flicking around it and had all these different pitches. And that was a discovery at the time; I had never experienced this before. And the microphone kind of found it for me. And I thought it was absolutely fantastic.

KN: *You see I have not recorded in this way at all. I've usually made pieces where I've taken it from my point of hearing rather than searched ...*

HW: Mmm ...

KN: *So this is teaching me a lot.*

(Sea-plane sound is getting quite loud overhead)

HW: A searching microphone: it is very much, again, a listening process, but at another stage – and that's what I like very much about this kind of work.

(The sea-plane is very loud by now, drowning the water sound)

HW: It has got worse over the years, you see the plane over there ... ?

HW: But the thing that I've got so excited about, especially with water, is that it details the architecture of that particular place and moment. And that's what gives us that sound right then and there. As soon as you shift that, you get a different sound. The water is an instrument, you see? So it's both to do with architecture and instrument building, and of course it has a connection for me. I used to love building little waterways as a child.

KN: *Making things go from one place to another!*

HW: On rainy days I'd be outside and I'd be building little channels for water.

KN: *But this is composing, Hildi, without the technology!*

HW: (laughs) Of course, as a child, although I don't remember the sounds of that time, they were there all the time, yes?

KN: *It is interesting I think, that when you're a child, playing with water is a very important thing.*

HW: Yes, very.

KN: *And I'm sure the child is thinking of sound.*

HW: I think so. When I played like this as a child, it was always in the holidays.

We'd be in the Black Forest or in the Alps. We didn't have much water where I lived! And so you could always kind of rechannel water ... into another place ...

KN: *Eight channels!*

HW: Right!

And since it often rains during your summer holidays, that's what we would do. My parents would make a point of encouraging us to go outside. Even on a rainy day you'd 'do' something – and I loved it.

(Pause walking, bird sings)

HW: They're way up in the tree tops ...

KN: *You don't know what that is?*

HW: I don't. I have never been with someone who knows what they are. So I still don't know, even though I've lived here for thirty years ... (start walking again)

KN: *You know the sound*

HW: When I was doing *Beneath the Forest Floor* I went to Lighthouse Park to see whether I could get some supplementary recordings. I already had all these things from the West Coast, from the real rainforest. And, one day, I thought I would go to Lighthouse Park and just see what's there, maybe some squirrels. But the West-Coast forests are so quiet that you actually don't get that many sounds. But they're there – the squirrels are definitely there. And sure enough there was a squirrel. But what I also found was a group of small, sort of wren-like birds feeding on these roots here. And I was probably only a foot away from the microphone, and from them. And they were fluttering about and, while they were doing that, they were also peeping. And I used those sounds, of the peeping, in what was, at that time, the quietest spot in the park that I knew. (And there were no sea-planes. ...) When I slowed those down, they became part of a sort of very beautiful pitched environment at the end of *Beneath the Forest Floor*.

HW: I just want to see the sign here ...

KN: *'Songbird meadow' ... isn't that lovely, it doesn't look like a meadow.*

HW: I have no idea where we are, this is so funny... I've never been in this part, it's beautiful!

HW: And so they were yet another songbird that I had not heard before when I was in the West Coast, but I know they are in the forest there.

HW: Here, look at this, my God!
(We stop at an open-air theatre, very overgrown)

KN: *There's a bird You have not been here?*

HW: No, this is the open-air theatre I'd heard about!

KN: *Oh yes, there's a stage, seats ... tree seats ... a bit soggy.*

HW: Imagine a concert here!

KN: *Yes ... but we're already having one.* (There is birdsong)

KN: *Look at the moss on top of that!*

HW: Beautiful ... I don't think there's anything happening here now. But it would be lovely, huh?

KN: *Ideal for a concert, you should do something!*

HW: Yes, but outdoor concerts here are too difficult because you never know about the rain.

But, imagine!

KN: *Do you know what they do here?*

HW: I think they used to put on theatrical things here

KN: *... because it's not a natural amphitheatre really is it?*

HW: No ... no ... let's go down to that ...

(We starting walking again)

HW: Another thing that happened with *Talking Rain*, that was kind of unexpected for me, was that I began to think about the liquidity in animal sounds. So I had recordings from frogs; frog recordings, some of eagles, some of young ravens – various, mostly those

kind of sounds. And also a sound that I love – a bird that's called the redwing blackbird. You find it in all the marshy areas here, and it has a very beautiful (sea-plane sounds nearly drown her voice) liquid call; and that's also in the piece, and totally unchanged. I don't change all the animals' sounds ...

Meander ... a strange hybrid

① CD[18]

The water is trickling past, very close to my ears. There are two streams of sound: the sound of a high-pitched, fast burbling and the sound of water falling into a dip or hole, with low-pitched plops and splashes resonating as it hits the bottom, or rebounds against the sides. At least that's what it sounds like to me, it's hard to tell – and now I'm realizing just how unfamiliar sounds can be when they're let out on their own.

A subtle filtering brings out the higher frequencies. There's a slight sleight of hand (an aural confusion there). Because there are no other sounds – there is no room for other sounds – my attention is on the 'hear and now', the close-up presence of water. When distant bird calls gradually admit the context of the outdoors, and some kind of wider landscape rises slowly around my abstracted listening, I have to decide which path to take.

except for – no, that's right, *all* the animal sounds are unprocessed. They are left the way they are, because to me there was a direct relationship between them and some of the processed rain sounds. That just 'happened' in the process.

KN: *Well, you noticed it!*

HW: (laughs) Yes, that's right. Well, that's what it's about. You do these things and then you notice the connections, right?

KN: *The thing I love about listening to your music, and Talking Rain in*

particular, is that somehow when I'm listening to the rain I forget that there's processing going on for a moment, or rather I'm aware that there's a toing and froing between unprocessed and processed sounds, and a feeling of it being an environmental recording.

HW: Which is what we do with listening anyway, yes? I mean we process all the time, and then we're back into listening attentively, and then we process again. Yes, I think it's probably similar . . .

KN: *You seem to have a consciously light hand with regard to processing. You're very subtle with it.*

HW: Yes, I feel that the processing is only there to emphasize things that are already there. So I'm not really trying to invent anything new. I'm just trying to extract what's there and exaggerate it a bit. And, because I'm delighted by what's there and I hear it in a certain way, I just want others to hear it in the same way!

KN: *You want them to share in your delight.*

HW: Yes, that's it . . . that's basically what it is, you know. I'm never very interested in the kind of sound processing that leads me way too far away from the original sound, *unless* it really makes connections . . .

But right now I am up close, near the stream. I am listening to the world from the water's perspective. My attention is bound up with this delicious, enticing, tactile sound. Just this sound.

And from this position, a magic congruity emerges: the gradual infiltration of frogs peeping in a chorus of trilling croaks. Their natural call is at exactly the same pitch and tempo as this trickling water sound. They are part of the abstracted sound, then they are part of the sound of water, then they are frogs. The water parts to reveal them before returning to cover them again. In that moment of transmutation, frogs are suddenly revealed like a gleam of gold in a stream.

And something essential about the sounds and what they say is also revealed through this compositional alchemy. Yes, it's an easy thing to take two sonically similar sounds – their destinies alike in terms of timbre, rhythm, tempo and general contour. And it's also a relatively simple exercise to apply digital processing that will accentuate the similarities and cast a shadow on differences. But it's the nature of the essential meaning of the two sounds that creates the real magic. Inside water, outside frogs. Abstraction, context. Inanimate, animate. But in spite of their differences, the sounds share a wealth of meaningful associations with this specific landscape.

This composed listening travels from shape to shape, and draws attention to aural similarities. The sounds invite a hybrid listening, to the ordinary made strange.

Surely such unexpected congruities please our creative tendency to find imaginative relationships between distinct things that naturally coexist in the landscape. Gazing out over a rolling landscape our eyes alight on that particular group of trees that forms a rounded repetition of the hill itself. There is a pleasure in coming across uncontrived connections.

HW: OK, now this is the riverbed ... more sounds ...

KN: *I'm going to make some in a moment by falling flat on my face ...*

HW: Yes, right!

This is a very nice high-pitched one. This is a nice little river here ...

KN: *I suppose this creek is just here because of the rain, do you think?*

(Water sound)

It's travelling quite fast.

HW: Yes, are you able to move the microphone without making noise? It's difficult.

KN: *Yes, I think so. Most of the time.*

Do you edit a lot of noise out?

HW: Lots – and also the hands, the 'bone sounds' that sometimes become low-frequency sounds. In natural recordings you can actually get rid of them because none of the sounds you want are as low.

KN: *Do you spend a lot of time cleaning sounds up first?*

HW: Ah, a huge amount of time. I clean all the time.

In a way I'm dusting and cleaning up.

Something that happened unexpectedly in

Talking Rain was that I had all these initial recordings, and was going to introduce rain on different surfaces, in different contexts. I didn't do anything to the sounds I had; they were basically clean recordings. And I started to mix and I realized that

Meander ... can you move without making a noise?

Ⓛ CD[19]

The materials don't perform; they exist (and some of them are temporary). I wasn't performing for the microphone at that moment, and neither was Lighthouse Park. Westerkamp and I hunch over the trickling stream as if we are listening in on private moments. When the microphone is no longer directed at us, we are no longer part of the landscape. Any noise we make is extraneous, and to be avoided. We are trying to have some respect.

And listen, this is how it was, I haven't changed anything. Two people talking, behind the trickle of a rain-fed stream. Our ears on sound, concentrating close up on this burbling of running water.

The sound is just a starting point for composition. Before you even get to cleaning up the sound and considering its nature, the microphone can impart an intense glamour (a Romantic light). But this is beyond reality, and I haven't even done anything to the sound yet. No high-pass filters, no time-stretching or granulation. Just how it was, but illuminated by the microphone. It causes the sound to leap forward and reveal its lustre, and its meaning too – like a torch in a dark place or water running over a dull stone.

Hildegard Westerkamp, and many other composers working with sound in this way, often refer to their work as soundscape composition. A soundscape sensibility involves composing layers of listenings and relistening, whilst staying quiet. There is no microphone noise in Westerkamp's piece, and no snatching of sounds away from their origins. Abstracted pyrotechnics don't apply. The performance is of a different order.

Is this the appeal of soundscape composition? This aural reinterpretation of the natural sounds of the environment creates a sonic landscape in which the audience is composed of motionless listeners, who listen in from outside as the natural world sings its private song.

Perhaps the soundscape composer tries to move without making a noise.

some of the recordings were made in the city so there were low frequencies. And when I faded them up, the first sound that you heard was the low frequencies, of course. So, I had to filter these frequencies out completely because I wanted to zero in on the rain. So I had to go back, do all this 'cleaning up', which I hadn't anticipated – should have

KN: *You don't notice it so much at the time when you're recording the sounds.*

HW: No. I was aware that they were sounds that had some low frequencies in them but I had forgotten that, of course, the low frequencies would be coming through.

KN: *Do you have a kind of plan when you're making a piece, a shape – or is it really the materials that dictate it?*

HW: In the case of *Talking Rain* I knew that I wanted to introduce the rain specifically first somehow, and to make sure it was not too easily confused with fire, and to make it clear that we were clearly in a rainy environment. And so, the way to do it was just to take these various recordings of rain soundscapes and bring them all together in some sort of fashion. And then I think I sort of vaguely knew that I was going to go on a bit of a journey inside the rain, by using the processed sounds. If I know the beginning of a piece I start it and then I realize, in the process of going into the piece, I have to do a lot more processing work and cleaning up work before I can get to those things. So, it kind of happens in parallel. I may know aspects of the piece, I may know the general curve of a piece

KN: *And for this piece you were thinking of radio while you were making it?*

HW: Yes, it was for radio

KN: *So you were consciously aware of that? You weren't just thinking, 'Oh I'll just make it'*

HW: . . . it scared me. Because I thought, 'How do you broadcast rain on a tinny, kitchen radio?'.

KN: *Yes. And mono perhaps . . .*

HW: I was thinking, 'How will people listen to this piece?' And I know my kitchen radio – it's terrible! So, what do you do? How do you let a piece actually get through?

KN: *This is very hard, isn't it . . . ?*

HW: Yes. That's why it was a big challenge actually and it took a long time for me to actually like the piece. I felt I was just struggling with the material mostly. I liked individual passages and individual sounds . . . but I really felt I was . . . I felt that it wasn't really a composition that I should be too public about. And then I just noticed that people really noticed it.

KN: *Well, many people like that piece. And when I've played it to people and performed it I've had very positive responses. You know, not just sort of the usual thing . . . so it obviously touches people, deeply.*

HW: Yes, this has really surprised me, very much. And maybe it's because I had to work so hard to get the piece to 'speak'. And the title itself is interesting because I couldn't find a title. And that's always a problem for me, when I don't find a title. Often I know the title before I do the piece – and then the whole meaning is clear

to me, and then I can work. But, if I don't have the title, I don't know what the piece is about. So, in this case I kept thinking about somehow the rain is *saying* something. And I had at one point also wanted to go to some native people and get some of their words for rain – but that failed; I didn't have enough time to develop that. And then I spoke to Norbert [Norbert Ruebsaat] my ex-husband. We used to do a lot of work together (sound of sea in background coming forward) and he is very good with language and I really like his way of working with language. And I played him the piece and said that I wanted the title to have something to do with how the rain speaks, speaking rain. And he said, 'Why don't you call it "Talking Rain"?' (Laughs)

KN: *It makes sense!*

HW: You know, like the talking sticks ... so there it was.

KN: *I'm so glad it hasn't got rainstick sounds in it.*

HW: Yes ... right!

KN: *Oh look, we're at the sea. I don't know if I want to go all the way down there.*

HW: You want to go down there!?

KN: *I don't know ... I think I'll fall over. It's too windy!*

HW: It's too windy ... hmm, so we are way over on this side now, interesting ...

KN: *What is this? Are these trees?*

HW: Yes, those are logs. This is the logging industry losing their logs as they go in the logging booms. And the whole coast is littered with them ... they just lie there.

KN: *Are they just left there?*

HW: Yes, it's very typical for West Coast beaches, all over.

KN: *It looks almost like rusted iron.*

HW: That's right ... they are very beautiful things, and I really like them. In some of the more abandoned beaches they are piled up several feet high.

KN: *You haven't made a piece with talking wood yet?*

HW: No, but there's a woman who was, in the early days, a student at the Sonic Studio [the studio at Simon Fraser University]. And when I was doing *Fantasie for Horns* she was doing a piece ... what was it called? ... *Wood on Wood on Water*. And she went to the beach and played them like log drums.

And it was a very beautiful piece, actually.

KN: *And I have often thought that perhaps people respond to Talking Rain so strongly because water is an elemental sound, and it seems those kind of sounds ... water and wood and wind are very ...*

HW: We relate to them strongly, when we allow ourselves. Yes. And I always find that the attitude to weather in the city is appalling. How people hate rain and snow and ... , oh, but I fall into it myself. You know, I've been complaining to you about the rain the last few days.

KN: *Because the weather hampers your activities, it is annoying in that sense.*

HW: Yes, seemingly it hampers it. And yet when I'm out here in Lighthouse Park, who cares!

KN: *And you can appreciate how beautiful the weather is.*

HW: Exactly! And you know for me, both composition and recording are always processes of discovery. And that's why I do it! It's like building that creek as a child. I'm not interested in being in the studio and creating synthesized sounds, and new sounds. It's not something that I ... it's not part of how I want to make music. That's why I have a hard time doing things with instrumental music, because I'm basically not that interested in it – unless I can find the connection between the instruments and environmental sounds, and undertake a process of discovery with instruments in the same way. For instance, in *Fantasia for Horns* I added the horns. The horn to me is an instrument that was used environmentally, originally – for instance, the post-horn, the hunting horn and that kind of thing. So there was a connection there for me. But I have a hard time composing for abstract contexts. They have somehow to relate to real life, always.

KN: *But also, they have to relate to real life because you're thinking of the listener as part of the work?*

HW: Yes, I think so – because I'm a listener myself. And the listening to sound is very much about that process of discovery, and the discovery in the process of listening itself.

HW: We're discovering a new trail here today. It's lovely.

KN: *Where do you usually go, do you have a favourite?*

HW: Well, there's sort of a favourite route that I take and I know how long it takes. Because one can get lost ... (laughs)

KN: *Thank you. Now you tell me. Well I only have one more tape, so we have to get out in ninety minutes.*

HW: Yes, we will, I promise. I don't have that much to say!

KN: *You were saying, to paraphrase, that you don't like the computer so much; but you are very much concerned with getting inside sound, aren't you? You are timbre and sound aware*

HW: Very, exactly . . . you know I like listening to some electroacoustic music up to a point, but I find it very tiring to listen to it when it becomes too separate from everything in my life. When I'm sitting in a blackbox theatre for two hours listening to nothing but abstract synthesized sounds then I get bored. Well, it depends of course on the composition – if it's interesting, well, then I don't get tired. I think to speak through these different sonic mediums we actually keep our ears alerted and awake in a way that's pleasurable. I think it's a question of pacing a concert properly, so as not to get tired by it.

KN: *But you're reaching a big audience that doesn't come from the abstract music world*

HW: Yes, exactly. People who actually have nothing to do with contemporary music actually quite like some of this stuff . . .

Here's another river, a river pathway.

. . . I mean, I've always felt on the fringes somehow. We probably all of us do.

KN: *Perhaps we need to feel like that.*

HW: Yes. But I have never had a feeling of exclusion, because the one pleasurable thing about being in the studio with environmental sounds is that you are in a sonic landscape that you can relate to. And it's also very private because you are in the studio, so that's where I like the studio environment. You don't get interrupted: you can be with those sounds and I think that on some level I like this feeling of being left alone while I'm working, like that.

KN: *I agree. And I sometimes begin to think of sounds in a very tactile, substantial way when I'm working with them in the studio.*

HW: Yes, that's right, and it's very detailed, it's – it's almost like eating. Touching and being touched by sounds.

Ah . . . it's beautiful over here

It's hard to explain to people.

KN: *It's nice to come across the sea so suddenly.*

HW: Yes, you see this might be OK down here, not too windy. This is gorgeous

KN: . . . Hey, we have a friend! (A dog passes by, panting)

KN: *Do you find you become sensitive to certain kinds of sounds after you've been listening out for them? I find I'm now listening to all the watery sounds*

HW: Yes, also as you walk here with all these rocks coming and going you get this interesting spectral change in the water. One of the things that I find most difficult to deal with is when I try to look for silence. It depends on where you are, but, of course, when you go out recording and you want to get only natural sounds, yet

you're near a city, it's very difficult to find. And it becomes aggravating. But, I try not to go out with too much intent when I record because you end up being disappointed. It's a bit like going to India, where you can't have any expectations . . . I think that's why I responded so much to the country because recording is very similar.

KN: *You have to be open to unexpected things in fact.*

HW: And I think that's what I really love about recording, and that's what I also love about India – there are these surprises and then you connect to them, and then you work with that.

KN: *The fortuitous . . . happenstance.*

HW: And it's interesting that in fact this kind of surprise element – unexpected things and activity – is not only peculiar to societies like India that are very socially full and busy, but it's the same in nature. So, in effect, a country like India on some level is not unlike a natural environment because it – the randomness of it, or the seeming randomness of it – is so strong that nothing is overorganized. I mean usually when you go into a mall you can sort of know what you're going to get, yes, and then the human element will give you some element of randomness . . .

KN: *There's no regularity . . .*

HW: Do you want to go up there and look?

KN: *Yes, yes, if we've got time – you're coming?*

HW: *We were here! Now I know, we were here!*

KN: *We were here before, just now*

HW: *That's right! . . . we were just . . . so this . . .*

KN: *This is where I changed the tape!*

HW: *Aha! (Raucous laughter)*

HW: So what must have happened . . . when we arrived here again I just thought, 'Oh they have the same name as for the . . . different spot. How unimaginative!' And then when I went up the same trail, we actually went up just the same trail we went down and then retraced our steps. Then we went up that complicated trail back up around the water . . . !

KN: *Well, I'm convinced.*

*I have no sense of
direction anyway, so it
could have been
anywhere!*

HW: So I have got to know another snippet of this park. It has a lot of trails, and I don't know them all by any means.

Meander . . . disorientation

Ⓢ CD[20]

The sound of water, magnified and impossibly close, becomes an intimate play of pitches, timbres and minute fluctuations. But the car tyres on wet tarmac stretch out towards the real world. From outside in the 'real world' the sounds of frogs emerge from streams of abstract sound as a new, related journey.

Composition is a process of reorientation in which gestures, phrases, timbres are placed relative to one another. Directions are indicated, thwarted, negated or mapped out as unfinished implications. Sounds travel in memory.

Can you hear them?

That's one map of the world.

KN: *It's getting brighter.*

HW: This is the nice part about this environment. As you go more directly to the coast like this, you don't get too much of the rain.

When the materials are field-recordings, then maybe orientation requires a bit more head-shaking. Listening to *Talking Rain* involves poring over a rapidly disintegrating map of the woods, where curling paths blur and cross into musical lines. It's confusing because it bears some resemblance to the familiar. Which path to take? And the rain gets into everything.

Later on in *Talking Rain* there is a swirling maelstrom of sound that seems to arise naturally out of a gradual increase in volume, density and general activity. This is a straightforward and effective musical technique. Applied to recorded sounds it has additional tensions to resolve.

HW: Ah, we were here earlier!

I'm curious where we came from.

KN: *We came down there. This is where we descended . . .*

HW: Oh my God, I didn't recognize it this way.

KN: *And this is the same trail again . . .*

HW: The same trail the other way around. I've never gone that way!

KN: *Well, there must be an analogy here somewhere with reversing a sound!*

HW: Very interesting, so we turned off earlier than we should have, or than I normally do. See I never recognized . . .

The sound of rushing, surging water becomes the dynamic material for a rhythmically fast montage, cut into a layered swirl of loud, low-pitched and dark timbres. A car swishes out of this turbulence but is no longer a defining moment, rather a sudden emergence that cannot compete with this stormy surrealism. In the background a tuned drone circumscribes space and refuses to let our listening out of this enclosed, musically defined enclosure. Although this 'mess' of sound – this *dénouement* – is very much built up in 'conventional' musical terms, its tension, I believe, is the result of an aggregation of gentle conflicts – the frogs that were water, the rain that becomes a car on a road, the close-up musicality versus the trickle and splash of natural distance. These ebbs and flows have offered a map of the world where no path is reliable. Instead, all paths are familiar, and no destination is guaranteed. You are left abandoned in the rain.

HW: The thing that fascinates me about Japanese design is the observation of nature in it.

KN: *In the way that it's a really strict stylization of nature.*

HW: Very much so. But it's still connected to nature and that's where I find the fascination – if it doesn't go too far. That shares something with that creek-building that we were talking about, the waterways building from your childhood, you know. Because, playing with building channels for rainwater, as a child, you get into all the detail, and you make your own little garden, yes?

HW: This is so funny!

KN: *Here we are . . .*

(Men passing, voices)

(Feet in water — strenuous climbing)

HW: Are you OK?

KN: *Yes I'm fine. I was just thinking, two female composers travelling upstream. Somehow that's terribly allegorical!*

HW: And, you know, in Europe, where my mother lives, I have a very strong relationship with that landscape. It's very beautiful and she has a small forest right behind her house, and behind it is a field, and then there's the factory [the Westerkamp family business], and some village and more forest. But the forest is so *transparent* in the winter. I was there recently, it's all beech trees, and so you can see right through it. And, you know, I don't remember noticing that as a child. To me it was the . . . like a dark forest.

KN: *Well, you were shorter!*

HW: Yes, that's right . . . but you can see right through it.

KN: *Do you think it's been cleared?*

HW: No, not really. It has not been changed all that much. It could be that the trees are taller now. And that maybe the branches were lower, that could be it . . . and yet I keep thinking, where can you find these darker sorts of places that I remember?

There's part of me that really would like to be closer to that again. I don't know, the older I get the more I yearn for it. It's something that I grew up with. And when I first grew up, after the war, we were in a house where there was a small forest across the street with these very old stone graves from a long time ago. And there was a sort of magic around that, and we used to play there. But there was a sort of freedom you know. I would just walk out of the house and there it was. There was a small street, but there was hardly any traffic.

KN: ... Let's go out here before we have to turn.

KN: *We've been here!*

HW: ... and you'll see the lighthouse.

(Walking, wind)

This is good place to sit in. If it was sunny now ...

KN: *You'd be able to sit and read here.*

HW: Yes ... (walking over rocks, wind, sea)

KN: *I didn't notice the lighthouse at all when we were here before ...*

HW: No, you can't see it from where we were.

It's a beautiful spot. And I interviewed the lighthouse keeper a few years ago. The lighthouse used to have an absolutely gorgeous foghorn that you can hear on the *Vancouver Soundscape*.² But now the foghorn has been changed to a 'beeeeeeep!'.
KN: *There's no one*

living in it is there?

HW: No, but there's a lighthouse keeper in the houses there behind.

KN: *So it's not an automatic lighthouse?*

HW: Well, yes, most of it is automated now. Actually the lighthouse keeper is there because of protests. He refused to leave because he said we still need people. And when they automated the last thing, he simply didn't go. And I don't know where it's at now, but he fought ...

Meander ... remembering

① CD[21]

Wrapped in the sound, we lean into it and remember other times like this. Other times when we braced ourselves against the wind, with the taste of the sea on our lips and our hair whipping in front of our eyes.

Other times when we turned away from an exposed cliff and walked back inland. Other times when the sound of the crashing waves and the blustery gale died rapidly to a distant surge behind us. And other times when this soothing, sea-shaped drone circumscribed the safety of our little tented world at night.

The sound of the wind subsides and puts distance between the 'reality' of that elemental sound and our creative interpretation of what this blurred, distorted signal might mean, signify or even merely feel like. Beauty is in the ear of the rememberer.

Do you hear it?

That's the sound of the wind.

What do you remember?

(Like straining your ears to hear distant birds, remembering takes a moment.)

If the paths that *Talking Rain* offers are remembered fictions and fictional remembrances, then listening becomes an imaginative making up. The listening composer is creatively writing sound.

Down below us the lighthouse keeper refuses to turn his back on the wind and the grey sea. That sound has defined his place in the world for

as long as he can remember. For him, it's a reality that he cannot abandon. Perhaps the sound of the booming sea has become so embedded in his consciousness that he cannot imagine a path that trails away from that accompaniment. His role and his experience are fused. Or perhaps I am making up a story for him, spinning it from my experience of his windy look-out post.

HW: ... let's go back now ... here ... and now I just have to make sure I've found the right trail ...
(walking, splashing). Every time I go through this process, but somehow it's harder now!

(Very windy, walking ...)

KN: *I really like that sound – or lack of sound – when you come away from the sea and you notice the change.*

HW: Yes. It's a memory of camping near the sea – at night when things quieten down and you're lying in your tent, and you're hearing the sea in the distance.

KN: *And you felt safe ...*

KN: ... *Where are you going? Are we going out ... ah, I see ...*

HW: Is this what we looked at before?

KN: *Yes, but it looks different from this perspective.*

HW: I saw the fence, I saw the fence – we were all the way here before and I didn't realize!

KN: *Well, I was occupying your attention at the time!*

KN: *I think this wood is just lovely, laid out like that.*

HW: *Isn't it . . .*

KN: *You want to photograph it don't you, it's so mottled.*

HW: *And this is really the winter look of the wood, that rusty . . .*

KN: *Beautiful.*

HW: I'm amazed, I've taken you twice on the same walk. I didn't even realize we were going on the same walk!

KN: *Well, we were talking, you were pointed at a microphone!*

HW: It's true, you know – you have a completely different memory of something if you were busy doing something else as well.

HW: Are you OK here?

KN: *I think so . . .*

(negotiating a high climb)

HW: This is not too nervewracking?

Male passer-by: Hi!
It's rather rough along that way, really steep.

HW: I know this trail. It's the way one has to go once one gets here.

KN: *It's the only choice!*

HW: This walk is such an unexpected pleasure.

Meander . . . the same trail twice

Ⓢ CD[22]

At the end of *Talking Rain* there is a moment where someone – Hildegard Westerkamp? – stops to listen. Everything else stops.

No, that's wrong. There are footsteps – a dissonantly human and recognizable sound that doesn't emerge so much as crunch on stage. And then these footsteps stop, while someone pauses and listens before resuming their journey. And that is the end of the piece. A reminder that this piece is itself an extended moment where everything stops to listen to what rain has to say.

This is an easy thing to do. There are many pieces where the composer's (or the apparent composer's) footsteps or voice crop up in the piece. Sometimes it's a straightforward narrative and sometimes it's a knowing aside. There are many songs where offstage studio chat at the end of a track teases us into thinking we were in on the game. In a landscape based on environmental sound a human presence is something to identify with. The woman with the microphone substitutes for the man with the movie camera. In other pieces, such as *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, Westerkamp is a constant presence; her voice leads us along with suggestions, reflections and a gentle direction or two. But she is not out there in the field, her voice is a *post facto* addition that imposes yet another presence – either visual and live, sitting on stage with a microphone, or aural and recorded, speaking over the sounds on the CD.

The presence in *Talking Rain* is carefully placed. At the end. Suddenly, hearing those footsteps cut across my aural path, I realize that we were on the same trail all along. Now it is made explicit that, despite all the different paths and traversals that the piece ostensibly meandered through, there was a guiding hand, or rather a guiding pair of listening ears. The path did not meander aimlessly, although it at times meandered with apparent aimlessness. Let's go this way, try

KN: *Good, for me too.*

HW: I've been
wanting to get out for
a long time.

HW: Let me see, let's go
there. I think that's the
easier one.

KN: *Up there is a trail?!*

this diversion, or follow this interpretation. Listen, what do you think? What do you feel? Can you hear it? That's *Talking Rain*. It's only at the end of the walk, when the footsteps crunch towards a real, familiar soundscape that we realize that what preceded was in fact not new at all – water, rain, forests, animals – this path is well known. But this old path was transfigured by an invitation to listen through a different, composed perspective – water, rain, forests, animals – this path is a new adventure.

It's the same trail twice. It was quite an expedition.

HW: Yes, this is a trail!

KN: *I don't want to do this one twice!*

HW: Ah, where does it go? ... This is definitely one version of it ...

KN: *Down there ...*

HW: Yes, this is it, we're right ...

Programme notes

Talking Rain (1997) for two-channel tape

Length: 16:00

Rainsounds from the westcoast of British Columbia, Canada are the basic compositional materials for *Talking Rain*. Through them I speak to you about this place. The raincoast. A lush and green place. Made that way by rain. Nourished by rain, life-giving rain. In *Talking Rain* the ear travels into the sonic formations of rain, into the insides of that place of nourishment as well as outside to the watery, liquid language of animals, forests and human habitations, all of which are nourished by the rain.

Talking Rain was commissioned by CBC Radio for Westcoast Performance. It was realized in my own studio, Inside the Soundscape, and was premiered on April 20, 1997. Most rain recordings for this piece were made by myself in and around Vancouver. Thanks to Norbert Ruebsaat for providing his recordings of ravens, eagles and frogs from Haida Gwaii and also for finding the right title for the piece, magically. Thanks to Bruce Davis and Peter Huse for their high-quality recordings made in the early seventies for the World Soundscape Project's environmental tape collection at Simon Fraser University; to Robert MacNevin for his equally high-quality recordings made 20 years later (1991 to 95) for the same collection; to David Grierson for his light footsteps and receptive ears during the recording of our rainy forest soundwalk in Lighthouse Park near Vancouver. Special thanks go to John Siddall, producer of Westcoast Performance for giving me this opportunity and for challenging me to create a radio piece with sounds that must be the most difficult sounds to broadcast!

Talking Rain is dedicated to my companion Peter Grant.

(Programme note from Hildegard Westerkamp's homepage at <http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/>)

Notes

- 1 14 April 2002, in Lighthouse Park, Vancouver, Canada. I recorded two tapes of material. During the second tape we realized that we were, physically, walking along the same paths we had taken earlier, but this time in another direction.
- 2 *The Vancouver Soundscape*. A double CD providing field-recordings of the Vancouver Soundscape in 1973 and in 1996 – see 'Recordings' for details.