

Hildegard Westerkamp and the Ecology of Sound as Experience. Notes on *Beneath the Forest Floor*



Frédéric Duhautpas

Montpellier III University, Rirra 21

Makis Solomos

Paris 8 University, E.A. Aesthetics, Musicology, dance and Musical Creation

1. INTRODUCTION

Hildegard Westerkamp



- Creation of soundscape compositions
- Ecological concerns
- Focus on a refined consciousness of sound
- Attention paid to relation and quality of our acoustic environments
- Reintroducing the notion of *experience* in her music
- The case of *Beneath the Forest Floor*

2. ON EXPERIENCE

Erlebnis and *Erfahrung* (W. Benjamin)

- Westerkamp's conception of ecology as putting human experience forward.
- The notion of *experience* as conceived by Walter Benjamin.



Two forms of experience : *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*

Erfahrung

'Long' and true 'experience', a form of knowledge lasting overtime or that which we inherit from tradition.

Possibility of a continuous and collective memory.

Erlebnis

'Inner, lived experience' (*Erlebnis*) inscribed in primary reactions and in present, at the expense of 'true' Experience (*Erfahrung*)

Mode of experience in modern world of technique, speed and information



References to Personal Life

Westerkamp's musical approach including light elements from her personal life and environment.

Not to expose herself in a narcissist way

but to share personal experience of listening and sensitivity to sound environment.

Some Examples

- *Für Dich* (2005), in which the *Liebes-Lied* poem by Rilke is read by friends and relatives
- *Breaking News* (2005), including recordings of her grand son
- *Moments of Laughter* (1988), including recordings of her daughter
- *Whisper Study* (1975-79), including recordings of her own whispers
- *Breathing Room* (1990), containing recordings of her own breathing
- Recordings of various from places important to her can also be heard: including Vancouver, where she has lived since the 1960's and the North of Germany, where she was born.

Experience of Place

Sound conceived as an important dimension of the World .

A compositional approach concerned with the 'sense of place'.

Westerkamp's conception of soundscapes compositions implies:

- A transmission of the origins of the sounds
- An experience of the context as a whole in which the sounds were born.

Her purpose: transmit the 'experience of the place'

3. BENEATH THE FOREST FLOOR: SUBJECTIVITY AND EXPERIENCE

Beneath the Forest Floor (1992)

Piece featuring sounds mostly from the rainforest of the Carmanah Valley on Vancouver Island.

A place of silence punctuated only by the sounds of small songbirds, ravens and jays, squirrels, flies and mosquitoes.





Beneath the Forest Floor explores a natural environment, focusing on the acoustic brightness of the place.

The piece includes various sounds from these forests, such as streaming water, birds, flies, mosquitoes.

The interaction of these sounds converge to create a peaceful, quiet, mysterious atmosphere.



"Beneath the Forest Floor is attempting to provide a space in time for the experience of such peace. Better still, it hopes to encourage listeners to visit a place like the Carmanah, half of which has already been destroyed by clear-cut logging." (Westerkamp)



Finding one's 'Inner Voice'

Beyond the contemplative experience, there's a will to call upon the listener's sensations in face of the sounds of this forest, attempting to revive an active listening experience.

The piece invites us to a sort of 'dialogue' between these sounds and our own inner life, to focus on the "inner voice. The sound in us"



On Experience

This composition is not meant to be just a cold objective representation of the soundscape as heard in real-life.

It is question of *sharing* the living relational experience of the composer's own listening to these forests.

The way the forest talked to her.

An experience of the place, an experience of her dialogue with it.



4. CONCLUSION

“I am no longer interested in making music in the conventional sense; I am interested in addressing cultural and social concerns in the musical idiom. That's why I use environmental sound and language as my instruments. I want to find the ‘voices’ of a place or situation, voices that can speak most powerfully about a place/situation and about our experience in and with it. I consider myself as an ecologist of sound”

(Hildegard Westerkamp, « Acoustic Ecology and the Zone of Silence” , *Musicworks* 31, 1985, p. 8).