

Belcarra – Program Notes

April 7, 2009

In the piece I have composed I tried to capture the soundscape of the Belcarra Regional Park. As an exchange student I am new to Vancouver and one of the things I found interesting here is how close the city is to the nature and how there are many natural sites conserved, some parts even barely touched, within the city, in the forms of parks. The parks are especially interesting because they provide interaction between humans and nature, even though this interaction is also mostly predetermined, confined and shaped by the standards of the way humans live. The nature seen and interacted by humans in parks is often similar to the interaction with animals in a zoo. What to experience and how is determined before hand and told to people by the planners of the park and the city. Another, perhaps more noticeable limitation brought upon nature in parks is human intrusion, in both direct and indirect forms. Direct form of intrusion may include structures built in and around the natural area. An indirect form of intrusion is the circumscription and degradation of the soundscape.

When I first visited Stanley Park on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I was astounded by the might of the trees, many of them probably untouched still and being there, in a city park, felt almost nothing short of being in a forest. However, I soon realized that acoustic space was filled with unnatural, city sounds that don't fit in with the atmosphere or ambiance of the place. Along with the ever-prevailing hums of the city, you would hear quite loudly the sounds of passing cars and planes. I find the place had actually quite a low fidelity environment. It was hard to hear the sounds of little or distant animals or the rustling of the leaves. Many sounds that you would expect to hear in such a place were masked entirely. As I initially had the impression that I was in a forest, this created a contrast for me and I felt alienated but thinking that it is actually still a city park, the sounds where not entirely out of context.

My choice of place to record in this project has much to do with this experience (probably most of the rest has to do with the inspiration from Hildegard Westerkamp). I was looking for a calmer place in terms of human sounds in the nature and Belcarra Regional Park seemed like a relatively remote spot from the heart of the city. When I went there for the recordings, again on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I quickly realized that, as remote as it was, the park was still invaded by the sounds of the city. The recordings I have made are from the half way through the Admiralty Point Trail and due to the location, soundscape was very interesting. Probably due to the reflections from the surrounding mountains around Burrard Inlet, there was a very high amplitude city hum, along with the sounds of West coast express and occasional cars, boats and planes. Again probably many sounds I would hear if the hum wasn't there were masked. I managed to lessen the effect with the use of high-pass filters but still the hum is present throughout the piece and it is in fact an essential part of the soundscape that needs to be captured. Early in the piece there is a part that emphasizes this [1:10].

Another type of sound that leaves humans' mark is the sound of humans themselves. I began the trail from the picnic area and came back there again to finish the trip. Of course on a sunny day there are many people there. Once you get going deeper into the trail, you gradually get farther away from the sounds of people talking, laughing etc. with the exception of occasional other people you meet who are also taking the trail. Except this picnic area where you can hear music played through boom boxes or sounds from cars in the parking lot, most of the sounds in the soundscape of the trail are acoustic, as opposed to being electroacoustic. The piece has a walking structure. In fact it is like a

soundwalk in many ways. And going from the picnic area into the trail has the sense of moving away from the human impact and going deeper into the nature (of course with the city sounds I mentioned, human impact can be felt everywhere in the soundscape). In this sense picnic area represents human impact. In the piece I wanted to create the contrast between the natural and human sounds, making it feel like the human sounds don't belong in the nature. Towards the end of the piece, on the way back from the trail this feeling gets heightened. When we get to the parking lot of the picnic area, sounds from cars create a disturbance that is represented by the flying away of the ducks from a pet dog. The pace of walking fastens, along with the heavier breath. This is due to the realization of not belonging there and trying to get away.

Overall, the piece has a structure in which the listener, with the guidance of the recorder, walks through the trail to explore sounds. In this way it is a transparent piece as that is exactly what I did when I was in the place. The recorder walks and occasionally pauses. The pauses are points where he realizes the presence of interesting sounds. When he encounters a squirrel for example, he stops to observe it, listen it. This structure is intended to encourage in listeners a listening-in-search attitude. Some sounds in the piece are processed, stretched to bring out their qualities and make an emphasis. All the processed sounds also have their original recordings in the piece as well and listener is encouraged to identify these sounds. This effort of making sense and associations of the sounds may contribute to the desired state of listening-in-search in the listener. An audience with an ear for exploration, habit of listening for new and different sounds may perhaps appreciate the piece better, but since most sounds in the piece are familiar sounds to many people, especially if they live in a city with big parks, the piece can appeal to a broad audience in creating the soundscape of the place in their minds.

I began recording with the idea that I would get lots of natural sounds including birds, and other animals and I was hoping to get samples clear enough to be worked with (process, alter electroacoustically). Mostly I got the animal sounds I wanted but unexpectedly with lots of noise with it, as I described. The hums in the piece and also other human sounds are in the piece as a result of what I ended up hearing. Of course since it was my first visit to Belcarra, I didn't exactly know how the soundscape was. Therefore I didn't expect beforehand the elements of the soundscape like the sea and the reverberant nature of the area in general. The idea of a walk as a structure was on my mind but I hadn't decided on it yet. However, when I got to the place and made the recordings, realizing the "human" in the nature, the composition started to shape better and walking seemed like a good way to represent the contrast I described above. I knew I wanted to process the sounds I recorded, play around with them and see what comes out, but I didn't know quite what to expect. Mostly I stretched the sounds and what I found as a result helped me to create the elements in the piece; both in sound exploration aspect since I could capture the characteristics of sounds better, and in creating the mood, most apparently I would say towards the end. I hope the listener to this piece feels the how humans, cities and the way of their living and organization affects both the nature, apart from humans and people themselves as included in the places and the ways they choose to live, emphasis being on effects on the soundscape and particularly noise pollution.