

BY ERIC LEONARDSON AND LOU MALLOZZI



The Tuning of the World:

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY

The Tuning of the World: The First International Conference on Acoustic Ecology drew over 150 people from a variety of disciplines to the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. Delegates represented, among others, the fields of music, architecture, philosophy, sculpture, education, physics, and radio. Each day began with a guided sound walk in which conferees participated in a brisk outdoor "ear-cleaning," experiencing the nuances of Banff's surrounding soundscape. In the afternoons, composer Pauline Oliveros held Deep Listening sessions, defined as "meditative explorations of forms of listening and sounding." Dozens of panel discussions, lectures, and performances filled the days and part of the nights—evenings found us gathered at the campus bar, continuing discussions begun at the variety of daily sessions, observing that the idea of acoustic ecology had attracted a myriad of people who seldom have the opportunity to meet and share ideas. The excitement of our assembly revolved around both an inability and an aspiration to precisely define acoustic ecology, a broad concept that includes not only sound in the natural environment, but also in the man-made environments of culture, society, technology, and politics.

Taking its name from R. Murray Schafer's groundbreaking 1977 book, the conference was also an opportunity to honor the Canadian composer, whose sixtieth birthday was celebrated during the event. Schafer founded the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, and initiated an interdisciplinary examination of the acoustic environment. The many references to Schafer's work included his notion of technological progress and its effect on the soundscape—while industrialization and electrification have contributed to the deterioration of the acoustic environment, technology also enables the study of soundscapes with increased depth. What was explored at Banff (an idea originally brought up by Schafer in his *Tuning of the World*), was that technological "progress" not only changes the soundscape, but that these changes are echoed in our own speech and art-making.

Silence was another ubiquitous topic at the conference, covered most eloquently in "Silence and the Notion of Commons," a lecture by Ursula Franklin, a Canadian physicist interested in the social impact of technology. Positing silence as a common good, a restorative practice that has deteriorated in a world

increasingly mediated by technology, Franklin cited Quaker religious services as an example of how collective silence can be a powerful force that allows the unforeseeable to happen. She promoted a silence that is not an enforced absence of sound but a collectively practiced absence of intentional sound-making. "For one to be heard, the rest must be silent," she said, insisting that silence is a human right.

A number of presentations focused on the relationship between sound and the designed environment. Perceptual psychologist Marc Crunelle's paper, "Acoustic History Revisited," made a strong case for the presence of intentional acoustic design on the part of European architects in Roman and medieval times. Presenting numerous historical examples, Crunelle outlined a definite, although not systematic, history of architecture that recognizes the *acoustic* consciousness of the designer, a subject conspicuously absent from almost all historical discussions of architecture. Composer Yu Wakao of Japan spoke about *suikinkitsu*, a type of nineteenth-century Japanese water-sound installation primarily intended for homes. Incorporating a large clay pot positioned underground to catch water run-off with stones at the mouth of the pot to control the incoming trickle of water, the result is a soft polyrhythmic ping-pong of drips. *Suikinkitsu* became inaudible in the din of the twentieth century and were eventually forgotten, until one was unearthed ten years ago. Since then hundreds have been restored in an effort to regain the experience of the sonic subtlety of quieter days.

The complex relationships of sound, technology, and nature were examined throughout the conference. "The Rhetoric of Nature in New Age Music," a paper delivered by Geoffrey Cragg, examined how direct recordings of sounds in nature are used in the service of persuasive codes of value. Citing examples of "pure" environmental sounds, classical music re-manufactured with spiced-up nature sounds, and newly composed music using environmental sounds, Cragg unmasked the contradictions inherent in this practice: Although this type of music purports to be an alternative to noisy urbanization and a standard-bearer for ecological awareness, in reality it seeks to capture nature as a trophy, nostalgically recontextualizing it in acceptable mainstream culture, hence commodifying the wilderness.

David Rothenberg's review of rain-forest recordings noted how attempts at capturing "unadulterated nature" may backfire, but cited Steven Feld's recording *Voices of the Rain Forest* as an exceptional departure. Feld, an ethnomusicologist who spent many years with the Kaluli people of Papua, New Guinea, learning about their culture from their acoustically centered viewpoint, was interested in producing a commodity with state-of-the-art equipment. He took care to record each individual sound in the forest, reassembling the recordings in the studio according to their actual occurrence in time and space. The result is a simulation but also a *musique concrète* composition. What sets Feld's recording apart is that it reveals the acoustic ecology of the Kaluli. We hear their speech, singing, and other activities blending with and responding to their acoustic environment.

In his own presentation, Feld detailed how the Kaluli literally map their music onto the local topology, uniting body and environment. Their music starts with birdsong and moves through flight paths, waterways, and footpaths, all of which are named and have stories associated with them, creating a vast repertoire of songs that respond directly to the environment. The Kaluli refer to their sound-centered relationship with the world as "lift-up-over-sounding," a name also given to non-musical components of culture, such as dance and costume. Feld has come to call this acoustic knowing "acoustimology" (acoustics + epistemology).

A number of tape and live pieces that explore the natural acoustic environment were performed throughout the week. *Beneath the Forest Floor*, an electroacoustic piece by Canadian composer Hildegard Westerkamp, was a highlight. Westerkamp transformed the sounds of birds, water, and wind into shimmering and thunderous timbres, creating subtle polyphonic layers of shifting densities that gave the piece a coherent shape. Even in its most abstract moments, the piece managed to keep the essence of the forest ever-present for the listener. By contrast, *Canyon Shadows: Animals*, composed by Robert Rosen with a libretto by Peter Christensen, was a disappointment. The performances by pairs of vocalists, instrumentalists, and movement artists were quite good, but the downfall was Christensen's libretto: At turns simplistic, reductionist, and pseudo-mythological, it denied the audience a contemplative experience of music, movement, and wilderness.

Frances Dyson touched upon many provocative insights on technology and the representation of sound. By analyzing the figurative speech of twentieth-century composers, sound theorists, and philosophers, she found "radiance" to be a common link between ancient and modern ideas of sound. In the visualization of Western rational thought—which defines reality by reduction into discrete objects or things—sound had always retained something of the unreal, spiritual, and mysterious, until the advent of electrification and sound recording. She described how the dislocation, disembodiment, and broadcast of reproduced sound leaves its radiant effect not only upon the

source but upon the auditor as well. She noted, for example, how John Cage thought of radiant sound as a benign and spiritual force before WWII. For Jacques Derrida, writing after the war and the Holocaust, recording technologies represent "sound which bears traces of bodies made atomic, turned into objects by the fires of war." Dyson's recorded sound and text piece, *Window Pain*, applied many of the radiophonic phenomena described in her paper. Using the hollow timbre of telephone voices, the clear "unmediated" voice of a female narrator, dramatically interspersed with synthesized drones, whines, and the "muted cries" of the sampler—the signature sounds of electronic music—she emphasized the vulnerability of a pregnant woman; her self-estrangement under the bio-social and medico-legal forces that play upon her body and psyche. In *Window Pain*, Dyson reiterated the "double edged significance" of radiant sound, reminding us of the visceral fears, anxieties, and hopes that we place upon technology as "destroyer and liberator."

Concurrent with the many performances was an exhibition of sound installations at the University of Calgary's Nickle Museum. Of the nine artists and collaborations represented, two outstanding pieces were Janet Cardiff's *an inability to make sound* and Shigeaki Iwai's *2048 Sounds (Bolts and Soybeans)*. In Cardiff's room-sized installation, one walked on raised planks past overturned chairs, dim lights, and a table with a coffee pot and cups—the detritus of violent memory—while listening, on a Walkman, to a binaurally recorded narrative involving sexuality and brutality. The two resulting spaces—one visual, the other sonic—charged each other with compounded emotion. Iwai's installation involved several delicate sculptures of horizontally arranged glass plates and speakers on frail metal tripods that emitted the sporadic sounds of breaking glass, placed in an all-white room. The overall effect was both poetically elegant and emotionally disconcerting.

Of prime importance were the remarkably fresh discussions covering both philosophic and pragmatic concerns of the discipline fostered by Claude Schryer's and Hildegard Westerkamp's open sessions devoted to organizing an international society for acoustic ecology. The result was the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology/Forum Mondial d'Ecologie Sonore (WFAC/FMES), a Vancouver-based international coalition of individuals and organizations concerned with the cultural, scientific, ecological, and philosophical aspects of the acoustic environment. The forum will address such relevant issues as encouraging and developing the community, funding, and future activities. As the first conference on a multifaceted, far-reaching, and increasingly growing field, The Tuning of the World successfully acknowledged and initiated dialogue between the acoustic community's vast and pluralistic constituents.

Eric Leonardson and Lou Mallozzi are sound artists living in Chicago. Mallozzi is also the director of the Experimental Sound Studio in Chicago.