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(sound examples on associated web site)

## **Some questions around listening: *Vancouver***

### ***Soundscape Revisited* by Claude Schryer**

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## **Introduction**

The primary question faced by anyone attempting a musical analysis is ostensibly quite straightforward: ‘how does this work?’ The motivation for asking the question is (ostensibly) universal, however expressed: a desire to gain greater understanding and knowledge and to apply both to one’s musical endeavours, whether listening, composing or performing. Pick up your tools, and off we go.

Ah, but it is never that simple. Even within the bounded, but increasingly difficult to bound, purview of ‘electroacoustic music’ it is often difficult to know which analytical implements to grab for most effect. Electroacoustic music does not fall into an aesthetic or a school any more than instrumental music and, in addition, making a functional distinction between the two is sometimes problematic. There are no ‘one-size fits all’ electroacoustic music analysis tools. But at least *musical* analysis is primarily to do with sounds and how they are placed, including a concern with their intrinsic nature, the ways in which they

have been constructed and formed, and the manner in which the relationships between sonic components have been prioritised, defined, composed and performed — isn't it? Particular agendas and foci might be essential to a certain work or aesthetic, be they sociological, cultural or performative, but understanding how things were 'put together' as music rests, somewhere fundamental, on tools that deal with sound.

That attitude is of course ridiculously naïve. A great deal of music has little to do with sound in isolation, and often the analyst is left scrabbling around for some relevant device that they were *sure* they owned, and will recognize if they can only just see it for looking. Popping round to borrow useful interdisciplinary tools (or bits of them) from someone else in cultural studies, sociology, ethnography, or some other more applicable field is useful and desirable, and I am going to do it myself. Interdisciplinary borrowings can be extraordinarily fruitful in contributing to and helping to amplify musical analysis and yet, by virtue of their intent, such tools often don't go quite far enough when it comes to thinking about how the music *sounds*, and conjecturing as to why it sounds that way, to understanding more about how it's put together, and gaining greater knowledge or insight in to what it's all 'about' in listening terms.

Analysis of any piece of music requires repeated listening, and electroacoustic music in 'fixed media' especially assists in enabling that. This 'return' listening is undertaken in a more interrogative manner than a first listening to the work and brings an accretion of applied thought, conjecture and, one hopes, discovery and greater understanding. At its best, analysis provides deeper knowledge of the specific work and yet also suggests ways of thinking that can be generalized as applicable to other, broadly similar, compositions. An analysis that aims at this kind of wider relevance must start from listening, but needs to probe further than a first person, phenomenological response.

### **The work in question**

This chapter considers, as a case study, a work from a broad repertoire that is sometimes called 'soundscape' composition: Claude Schryer's *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*. This composed portrait of Vancouver, using source

materials recorded in the city is, I suspect, also an analytical exploration of listening and re-listening, using composition itself as an analytical tool.

Itself a borrowed portmanteau word, 'soundscape' already lugs behind it a certain amount of baggage relating to landscape studies, ecology, and various assumed motivations on the composer's behalf, not to mention certain other assumptions as to what the listener should best attend to. One of the chief assumptions, quite often and perhaps occasionally because it is easiest to talk about, is that all such work is — or should be — 'message driven', addressing either ecological or sociological concerns.

Additionally, there appears (to me, at least) to be a bias towards discussing works where the nature of the sonic landscape recorded is somehow extraordinary to most people's experience, whether through being unusually quiet or 'natural', from a 'threatened' environment or, conversely, presenting loud, 'gargantuan' industrial or noisy environments that most people would not experience in daily life. For such works, a tendency towards exoticism in sound is often difficult to detach from analytical discussion. When work is made from recordings of places and the people in them (or not in them), ecological and anthropological concerns can define the analytical approach and tools. Rather than being intent on musical analysis this becomes another, equally valuable but different, exercise — that of 'doing anthropology in sound' (Feld and Brenneis 2004).

One might argue that 'musical analysis' might, and should, include all these approaches, dependent on circumstances. I would be the first to promote interdisciplinary study that is responsive to the situation, but in this chapter I would like to focus my analytical approach on listening and sound. I would like to branch outwards from that starting point in relation to work in which the original place and provenance of the recorded material remain significant in the finished work. The motivations behind such works may be diverse and similarly interdisciplinary, the treatment of sounds may vary, and many will have extra-musical priorities, but they all at some level, I suggest, address the embodiment of *listening* in a place.

## **The listening in question**

In works such as *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, where the sound materials are documentary recordings of a pre-existent sonic environment and are still recognizable as such, the listener is encouraged to employ listening behaviours comparable to those employed in everyday experience; behaviours in which memory, recognition, personal and learned response, and all kinds of other interpretive responses are implicit — quotidian listening, if you will. If the composer (or performer/improviser) has made a point of retaining that connection, and worked to draw attention to this, then the way in which the listener individually experiences the work is evidently important to its meaning.

To complicate matters further: as is so often the case in music made from recorded sounds, the compositional process itself is one centred on a listening analysis of the available materials by a composer who, often, was present at the time of recording — and so initially experienced the sounds in the context of a particular time and place. That temporal disjunction between ‘sounds from then’ and ‘listening now’ is, I think, an important and defining aspect of this kind of work. However, the ‘embodiment of listening’ doesn’t require the composer’s presence at the time of recording as a necessity, but rather that it is in some manner ‘enacted’ as part of the composition — something I will go on to discuss in relation to Schryer’s work.

## **The analysis in question**

This brings questions about the subject of analysis, in relation to a work in which listening is deemed material. What is being interrogated — the work or the listener’s response (and that includes the ‘listening composer’, as perceived in the work), or the relative success in representing ‘listening’ to another listener? In what way do these differ, and would gravitating analytically more towards either one or the other influence the kinds of questions asked, and the kinds of understanding gained? It all becomes rather circular — a Through the Looking Glass dilemma.

What tools will work? If each individual's subjective listening to the work is, effectively, part of its performance — or (let's be brave), of its content — by what means can that individual response be analysed usefully, or at all, outside of undertaking some massive interpretive phenomenological analysis study for every listener, for every single work that qualifies? Even if that were possible, what knowledge would result?

An effective musical analysis of such work might entail retaining, *as an analytical tool*, the ways in which we listen in daily life and, more than this, becoming self-consciously aware of how the many facets of 'ordinary' experience contribute to what appears to be wholly aural experience, but rarely is. This is an analytical approach that benefits from incorporating thinking such as Clarke's ecological listening (Clarke 2000) or the many and various writings by composers and theorists on different 'listening stances' (including my own earlier writing: Norman 1996) that draw attention to associative and referential connections to sound.

A conscious attention to the multifarious nature of aural experience in everyday life, via a 'thick description' (to borrow an anthropological term itself borrowed from elsewhere), might facilitate an analysis of 'meaning making' in work made from documentary sounds. For instance, if both sonic and social meaning are so integrated within an environment that changing or accentuating one might do irrevocable 'damage' to the other, a listener-analyst might concentrate on describing this, identifying to what extent — and how — a composer succeeds in achieving an effective balance between them, or how and why they would choose not to.

If a work's *raison d'être*, or a fundamental part of it, is the relevance of quotidian listening in everyday meaning-making, then the work becomes itself a reflexive form of musical and extra-musical analysis — one that proceeds by means of a creative analytical methodology more commonly known as 'composition'. As I hope I will be able to indicate through describing and investigating Schyrer's work in relation to its compositional context, composing itself might be examined as a form of analysis.

## Some questions around listening to *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*

### Why was the work composed?

Context — place, time and provenance — can sometimes be illuminating. For *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, knowing more about the context of composition helps to inform part of the analytical journey in that it has a direct bearing on the focus, and probably the compositional approach, of the work.

Schryer was one of four composers commissioned to make a piece during a 4-week residency at the Sonic Research Studios, Simon Fraser University (SFU), organized with the assistance of composer and theorist, Barry Truax. This formed part of the Soundscape Vancouver '96 project, directed by Hildegard Westerkamp, to whom *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* is dedicated (Schryer 1996/2007). The composers were invited to use materials from two collections of recordings of Vancouver: those made during the work of the World Soundscape Project (WSP)<sup>1</sup>, between September 1972 and August 1973 (recorded by Howard Broomfield, Bruce Davis, Peter Huse and Colin Miles); and a new collection, made between 1991 and 1995 (recorded by Robert MacNevin and Scott Morgan). The completion of recordings for the second collection was the instigation for the project. While none of the composers was from Vancouver (two were Canadian, two German — the project was held in collaboration with the Goethe Institut in Vancouver), all four were already deeply sympathetic to the focus on acoustic ecology initiated at SFU by the WSP — a year later, Schryer went on to become co-founder of the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology.

At the end of the residency the works were presented in concert at SFU, in conjunction with a symposium, held the next day, at the Goethe Institut. Shortly after the project, Truax released a double CD of extracts from both the 1970s and 1990s recordings alongside documentaries and the four compositions, mixed

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<sup>1</sup> There is insufficient space here to rehearse the history of the WSP's early period of activity, which is well documented elsewhere. The more pervasive 'tradition' the group's work initiated, of considering the natural soundscape through an artistic lens, has continued at Simon Fraser University, in the main part due to composer Barry Truax's presence on the faculty (until his recent retirement) and Westerkamp's proximity, living in Vancouver. The interested reader is directed to <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/sound-and-vision/2013/07/> for an informative summary of the group's original work in context.

down from 8-track to stereo format, so extending the life of the project and enabling listeners, worldwide, to encounter these responses to the Vancouver soundscape (Cambridge Street Records 1996). This CD set is an important documentation: of the Vancouver city soundscape over time and of a project in which artistic response was prioritized as a means of bringing people closer to appreciating the social, ecological and aesthetic relevance of the soundscape and their place within it. With the passing of time, an increasing concern with the audible environment from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes the arts has further heightened the prescience of this work.

### **What is 'revisited'?**

On the face of it, the *Revisited* in the work's title is an uncomplicated wordplay: the earlier sound recordings had been 'revisited' in conjunction with those from the more recent collection as the reason and means of composition; in the work, Vancouver is 'revisited' by the composer, and by the listening audience. Also revisited, however, is a variety of asynchronous listening activity.

### **The sound recordist's listening**

The source materials for *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* are in part a documentation of the sound recordists' listening choices. Microphones in hand, they were the original aural explorers, intent on sound. More questions, now. Were they in search of typical, interesting or unusual sound environments? To what extent were they influenced by their knowledge of the city and of any personal 'favourites' in the soundscape? Did they set out with a 'script' as to place and time to record? Even if so, which were those recordings born of 'happenstance', from catching an unexpected and glorious sound environment? A socio-historical study of the WSP's work, including interviews with the recordists, might well reveal more detail but my point here is simply that listening is already embedded in the materials. As in a first-person narrative, that 'presence' becomes a role for reader-listeners to identify with. This tendency is made explicit in the central movement, 'Walk', which is a recording of someone

walking in a quiet forest environment. The footsteps cease, but the environment continues while everyone stops to listen.

### **The composer's listening**

Schryer was handed recorded sources that documented places and times about which he could have no personal memory. Perhaps this is a strong position — with only sound to go on, his initial encounters with the recordings would necessarily have had a listening-focused intimacy (although no listening is devoid of imagination). As he selected, trimmed, moved about or abandoned sounds he would no doubt have perceived, created or destroyed apparent connections between the different recordings, each time inscribing a deepening relationship to them as 'materials' with meaning. It is this process of composing that remains vivid in his memory:

... long hours in the SFU studio, editing and trying different mixes in order to create 'music' from the sounds. It was fun.

... I did not have a particular set of events in mind. I listened to the material and composed a 'composition' based on what I liked ...

... I don't recall any intention in comparing decades or eras but this might well have been a compositional strategy as I was playing with the perception of place and space through the recordings.

(Schryer, personal correspondence, 6 August 2013)

This refreshingly candid description of process is not only honest but very true to listening experience in life, where preferences are often bound up with personal psychology and/or the experiences that an individual has come to associate with particular sounds: one person may like the calming sounds of quiet rain while another prefers the exhilarating roar of the ballgame. In choosing materials that he 'liked', Schryer moved towards creating a representation that reflected his worldview: *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* is, like any expressive portrait, as much an impression of its maker as of its subject.



## The listening audience

Waiting expectantly, and possibly quite in the dark, the original audience would have included Vancouver residents interested in the subject of the project — their home city and its sonic identity. The first performance was over an 8-channel diffusion system that ‘transformed the traditional concert hall environment into an electroacoustically enhanced place for soundscape listening’ (Truax 1996). Multi-channel ‘immersive’ diffusion was not uncommon in the mid 1990s but must have been a more unusual experience for at least some people in the audience, for whom both city and concert hall were thus de-familiarized.

The first audience members would have brought their listening experience of Vancouver with them to the concert hall, almost literally still ringing in their ears. Listening to Vancouver through the work, this audience would have noticed familiar and unfamiliar sounds and would perhaps have been more attuned to the difference between contemporary and archive soundscapes than we are able to appreciate from this distance.

A composer working with soundscape recordings is also working in the knowledge that the work will invite others’ thoughts, memories, imaginings and associations. No listener is a *tabula rasa* (not even a newborn child), and listening is never immune to individual bias. For any soundscape work there is inevitably going to be quite a listening party.

## How are things put together?

There are nine short movements, each with a title (a seven-movement release exists — ‘Noise’ and ‘Walk’ were dropped<sup>2</sup>). The longest movement is just under 4 minutes in duration and many of the others are considerably shorter:

1. Eagle 1:52
2. Fire 3:50
3. DroneSong 1:27
4. Noise 1:30

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<sup>2</sup> The shorter version is on Schryer’s solo CD, *Autour*, [Empreintes DIGITales](#) – IMED 9736, 1997.

5. Walk 0:41
6. Industry 2:11
7. Horn 2:08
8. Beans 2:28
9. Blowin' 1:32

It is worth reflecting further on the choice of a multi-movement form because it is more usual for 'soundscape' compositions to adopt expansive proportions, in which long durations and slow rates of change assist a contemplative listening engagement: examples that come to mind, from works made by the 'WSP composers' at around the same period, include Hildegard Westerkamp's immersive *Talking Rain* (1998) at 17 minutes and Barry Truax's four-movement *Pacific* (1990), 36 minutes in duration.

In terms of relative durations of movements the original nine-movement version of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* seems roughly mirrored around movement 5, 'Walk'. As already mentioned, this is also the only movement to reference 'a listener', explicitly. This mirroring around 'Walk' isn't rigorous in terms of duration but does seem to extend to aspects of the other movements' individual character: 'Eagle' and 'Blowin'' are both relatively slow paced, mostly outdoors, and feature that familiar sound for inhabitants of British Columbia — steady rain; 'Fire' and 'Bean' both place a particular, opening emphasis on Chinese culture and are somewhat similar in the 'density' of activity and number of environments presented; 'DroneSong' and 'Horn' both feature 'song' (a maudlin drunken song and the opening notes of the Canadian national anthem, respectively) and horns; 'Noise' and 'Industry' each build dense layers of mechanical or industrial sound. Whether this arrangement was intuitive or not, the result is a group that is distinctive in its variety of depiction, and from its members being arranged much as one might hang a series of portraits in a gallery space — ready for visitors to appreciate as a whole or individually.

Within each short movement, duration and the rate of events are also 'compressed'. This is not a work that 'speeds up' the world through a helter-skelter time-lapse ride; neither is it the inverse, a series of 'close ups' that examines small things in microscopic detail. Rather, the proportions of reality

are preserved, as in a set of miniature paintings that each fit a whole view within a tiny frame. Miniature representational forms are seductive because they invite wonder at their achievement (that is, at both the result and the maker's skill) and also position the viewer (or listener) in a different, externalized relationship to the recognizable things depicted. They demand a temporary 're-scaling' of one's perception that recasts their dimensions as the normal frame of reference. Through this magic coercion they become a convincing 'world'. We lean forward, peering in amazement. The return to life-size experience resumes our place in another world that had, for a few minutes, paused in consciousness. For time-based 'miniatures', however, this sorcery is compromised, because time does not pause or 'wait' and there is no direct equivalent to staring, spellbound, at an exquisite portrait, three inches in diameter. One approach for listening might be to miniaturize the 'perception of time passing' — that is, to maintain the proportions, materials and context of time passing in the world (or in a larger work) — a perceptual quality — but to re-scale this perception so that everything happens 'as might be expected' but in a compressed, miniaturized manner. I think that 'Eagle', the first movement of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, achieves exactly that.

## 'Eagle'

### Audio example 1: 'Eagle'<sup>3</sup>

**Duration: 1:52**

'Eagle in forest, music in Chinese shop, soft rain, train whistle and echoes of the 9 o'clock gun.' (Schryer, CD liner notes for 'Eagle')

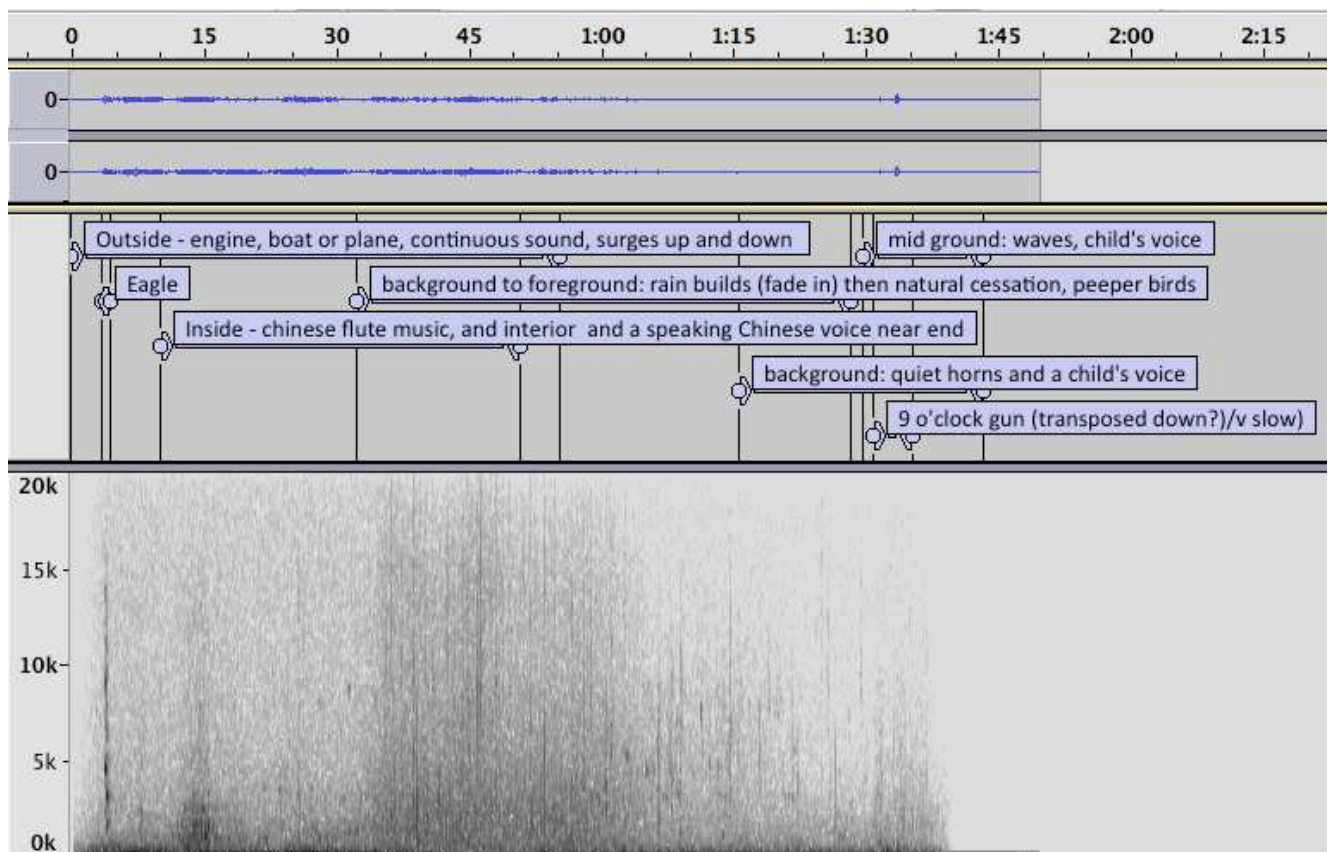
Figure 1 provides a brief descriptive summary of the clearly recognizable material in 'Eagle'<sup>4</sup>. The number of 'environments' or events noted does not necessarily correspond to the number of sound sources used. There is no reliable

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<sup>3</sup> All music examples reproduced by kind permission: Eagle, Fire, DroneSong, Blowin' from *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* (1996) by Claude Schryer (SOCAN, SODRAC) / Ymx média (SOCAN, SODRAC). Previously released in 1997 on the compact disc *Autour*, empreintes DIGITALes (IMED 9736).

way of distinguishing aurally between 1970s and 1990s sources; the knowledge would be of largely historical rather than analytical interest in any case, since the 'Vancouver' created by Schryer is a portrait that transcends time and place.

**Figure1. 'Eagle' events and spectrum.**



'Eagle' commences outside (a relatively quiet outdoors ambience is audibly apparent, and the CD liner notes confirm it is a forest). In the background, an engine humming — perhaps a distant small plane. After a few seconds, an eagle's cry: the single, loud and high-pitched squawk is an unequivocal announcement of presence.

Fast tempo, exuberant Chinese flute music fades in above the quieter, outside world, which rises into the foreground once more before receding. The music, which sounds broadcast rather than live, continues and a Chinese speaking voice is briefly heard. This new place is an inside environment, as is

apparent from the resonance of the voice (the liner notes confirm it is a shop). For a short while, three possible places co-exist: the outdoor ambience, the shop, and the music.

Now, the sound of steady rainfall emerges, rapidly overwhelming the existing sounds to become the spectrum-hogging foreground, and continuing to build in amplitude. This sound dominates for 20–30 seconds, quite a long period by comparison to the preceding shifts. The rain sounds fade, not by the composer's intervening 'fade out' but in the recording itself, as the shower gradually ceases and dissolves into occasional drips and drops. When both the weather and the spectrum clear, small 'peeping' birds start up. After the rain, we are left standing beneath trees in a habitat where birds are unbothered by human presence or any traffic noise.

During the cessation of the rain another ambience had started to appear, still quietly: an outdoor environment with the very distant sound of children's voices, and a breathy train whistle (identified as such in the liner notes). The quality of the voices indicates an expansive, open area, perhaps a beach. This guess seems reinforced by the closer sounds of lapping waves. A few seconds later comes the muffled and 'unusual' sound (in this context) of a reverberating cannon shot — only the echoes, not the shot itself. Schryer's notes describe it as 'echoes of the 9 o'clock gun', an enduring landmark in Vancouver that is fired across the harbour each evening at 9pm.

This is not a cut and paste collage where the listener is relocated abruptly from one place to another. Instead, environments 'fade up' gradually, giving the impression that they have already been going on for some time and are just now coming into aural focus. With the exception of the rain ceasing, which provides a moment of stillness rather than departure, the ambient environments leave by means of a gradual 'fade out', maintaining the aural illusion that they are continuing elsewhere. It is the listener's 'earpoint' that has moved on: as in traversing a real city, one foreground ambience is overtaken by another as the listener — not the environment — travels from place to place. At 1:52 in duration, 'Eagle' may be a short movement, but it is slow listening. One sound environment after another has successively entered, become the focus of listening and then faded out as another enters. This is the kind of leisurely

exposition that might ensue in an expansive ‘soundscape’ work — but here the structural proportions are compressed within a miniature form.

The first movement of any multi-movement work, when not simply an introductory flourish, has a dual role to play: as a movement that is self-sufficient in form and content, and as a ‘scene-setter’ that indicates the scale and aesthetic direction of the work as a whole. ‘Eagle’ performs both roles so convincingly that the next movement, ‘Fire’, seems epic at nearly 4 minutes in duration.

### **How are things connected musically?**

Schryer describes *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* as an ‘impressionistic portrait of the musicality and poetry of the soundscapes of Vancouver’ (Schryer, CD liner notes). His choice of the word ‘musicality’ is a little odd, or seems so initially. It might be better replaced, in the sense I think he means it, with the rather more clumsy ‘inherent musical properties’, but one has to allow a certain artistic license. Even so, when composers talk of finding what is ‘inherently musical’ in a natural soundscape, they are addressing some other complexities around listening that are, I think, hard to pin down.

Taxonomies of sound or listening can be restrictive, possibly best treated as an untrustworthy starting point for any kind of musical study or analysis. All I will offer are a few passing considerations, as a precursor for examining specific aspects of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*.

There are sounds in the urban or rural ‘natural’ soundscape that might be deemed ‘musical’ by human listeners. These have sonic tendencies in various, overlapping combinations and are likely to ‘appeal’ to listeners as having form, pattern, or appreciable euphony or timbral fascination. They might include sounds that have been constructed, or are biologically produced, to function as aural communications — birdsong, animal cries, or human speech or clapping, for instance. There are also sounds that imaginative listeners can endow with similar intent because they demonstrate apparent patterning or organization, while knowing this is not really the case — the rhythmic drumming of rain on a roof, for instance. Implied or a quasi-anthropomorphic ‘fictionalized intent’ can be attributed to everything from machine noise, foghorns, telephones and bells

to the waves, the wind in the trees or the breathy sound of a distant train whistle. What's more, all these examples have the potential to be listened to, or re-contextualized, as 'music' because all have contours that are, or seem, organized and so are, or could be with some intervention, 'like music'. Making, perceiving and imagining music from the inherent properties of sounds is, as Schryer himself puts it in relation to making his work, 'fun' — a form of imaginative play.

There are obviously many other sounds that are appealing for sonic or other reasons and which have meaning for many, or for a few, listeners. There are sounds that in their natural context might not be perceived as 'musical' or sonically interesting. They might well go unnoticed, or be regarded as obtrusive noise (a plane passing overhead might do either, depending on the listener and the context) but could become suddenly noticeable by their absence. One might take the view that people have the ability, in the right circumstances, to locate 'musical' or at least interesting properties in all humanly perceivable sounds. Certainly, a great many sounds are considered 'of interest' in *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*. Footsteps, humming machinery, and even the clamour of the crowd at a raucous ball game —all these appear, re-contextualized as a potentially musical experience. In each case, the natural properties of the sounds are preserved.

On the whole, there is very little *overt* audio processing in this work and audible manipulation of sound is not a foreground concern. *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* conceals its sonic artifice in the service of different goals that focus on noticing qualities within the natural soundscape, rather than transforming its identity beyond recognition. Nevertheless, there is a great deal going on behind the scenes to create organized, musical connections through careful, understated structural devices that are built through sound and listening. A brief look at the spectrum for 'Eagle', for instance, reveals an acute ear for registral space and the timbral characteristics of sound environments. The spectrum is orchestrated (whether consciously or not) to be roughly symmetrical over the movement's duration, with the central rain section occupying all frequencies and either side reducing the information to lower frequencies. The eagle cry cuts a sharp peak across the higher audible spectrum.

Balancing this, at the other end of the piece, the echoing of the 9 o'clock gun causes a brief surge in the lower frequencies.

While it might on first, or even subsequent hearings, appear quite free-composed in its ebbing and flowing of environments and juxtaposition of seemingly diverse sound sources, 'Eagle' is quite rigorously constructed. The Eagle's screech and the 9 o'clock gun's alert, the spectrum's symmetry, and the relative proportions of each episodic shift of ambience: all these are carefully placed to elicit and guide listening through a composed sonic narrative.

### **'Fire' and 'DroneSong'**

#### **Audio example 2: 'Fire'**

**Duration: 3:50**

'Chinese firecrackers, folkdancing, Krishna musicians, baseball game, tennis, mechanical piano, gulls in the harbour, 9 o'clock gun, electronic telephone. Main Street bus, various natural and processed boat horns and sirens.' (Schryer, CD liner notes for 'Fire')

If footsteps or engines can be induced to elicit 'musical' responses, recordings of music in the soundscape can, conversely, acquire weighty extra-musical meaning. In addition to naturally occurring sounds with 'musical' potential — defined pitch, rhythmic pattern or attractive timbre, for example — archive recordings of a vibrant, culturally varied and reasonably cosmopolitan, city included music of various kinds. *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* makes some inspired, and entertaining, connections between them.

#### **Figure2. 'Fire', main events and spectrum.**



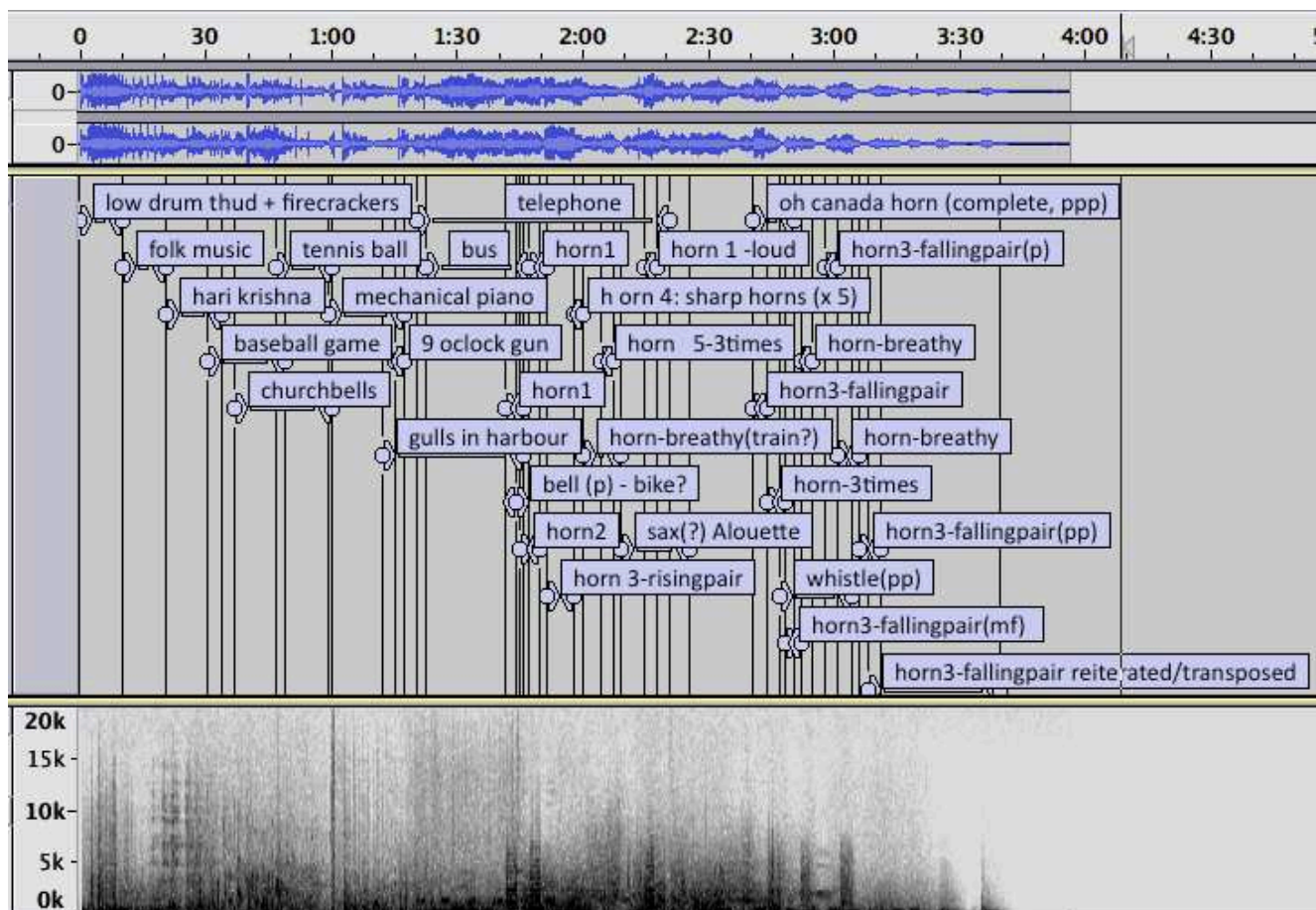


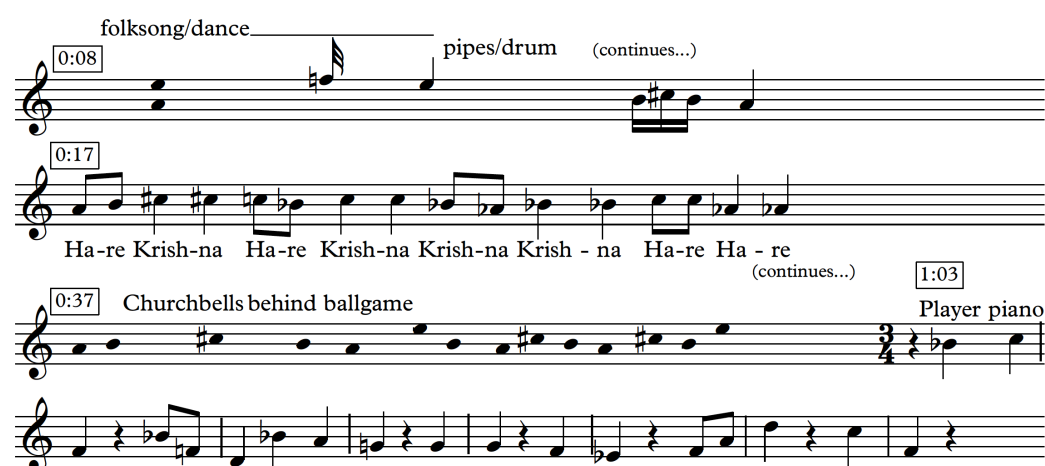
Figure 2 provides a descriptive table for 'Fire'. Like 'Eagle', and like other movements, 'Fire' is composed as a series of overlapping layers that fade in and out of aural focus, in what appears to be a 'stream of consciousness' progression in terms of connections between them. However, on further investigation, the composition is rigorously, and subversively conventional, in its musical construction.

'Fire' opens with a compressed succession of environments in which music, rhythm or ritual form a part: the thud of an iterating drum beat on a low Csharp (approximate pitch). Above this, exuberant Chinese firecrackers percuss the air; jovial folk music takes up the beat with another integral low, heavy pulse; next, Hari Krishna singers pass by to the sounds of cymbals in a slightly faster tempo and as they fade (and in a nice cultural irony) Christian church bells ring a change on the same melodic pitches, although barely audible under a different congregation — a raucous baseball game crowd. In a surreptitious insertion, the rhythmic back and forth of a game of tennis, panned to and fro, provides a new

'beat'. This evolving sequence is summarily dismissed by the foreground sound of a coin in a slot, and a player piano strikes up an exuberant honky-tonk waltz. In the course of a minute the music has moved from fireworks and street music, through dancing and religion, to games and then a 'machine music' impersonation of performance. The ambience has moved too: from outside to inside, from the street to the tennis court and, finally, to the close-up 'non-space' of a recorded player piano — music for hire.

The material may be diverse, and the cultural journey disorienting, but other 'musical' connections are subtly integrated. Figure 3 outlines the main shapes for the more discernible pitched material (notation indicates approximate pitch):

**Figure 3. Pitch contours for material at beginning of 'Fire'.**



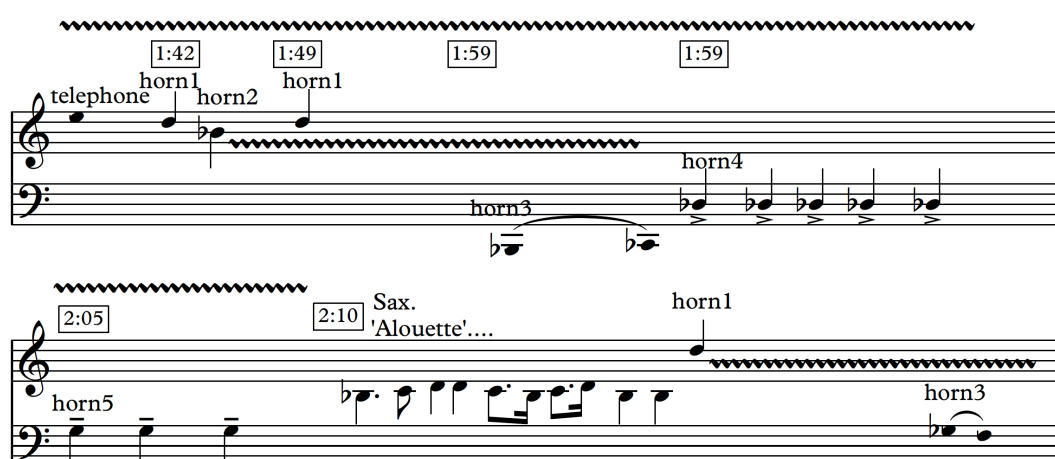
Having put the money in the slot, it pays to spend a bit more time with the prominently featured nickleodeon (a player piano that requires a nickel in the slot to play). There was a Player Piano Museum in Vancouver for a relatively short period in the 1970s<sup>5</sup>, so perhaps this was the source. Here, a musical

<sup>5</sup> A little research reveals that there was a notable piano player collection in Vancouver in the 1970s, perhaps the sources of the recording. <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/rutlandherald/obituary.aspx?n=doyle-h-lane&pid=143611083#fbLoggedOut>  
<http://www.mmdigest.com/Archives/Digests/201006/2010.06.21.01.html>

instrument that provided one of the earliest ways of ‘recording’ performed music, became the subject of recording and is revisited in the work for its multi-layered meaning as music, recording machine, and a piece of social history. Like many aspects of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, there are layers and ‘punning’ meanings for its role in this movement.

The piano, along with a crowd of mewling seagulls, is banished with the firing of the 9 o’clock gun (more later, on its recurring presence). The phone rings, and nobody picks up. As it continues, an orchestrated chorus of boat and other horns ensues, and then accompanies a few bars of a French-Canadian folksong, ‘Alouette’, busked on sax (or possibly clarinet; either way, ‘horn-like’ in timbre). Figure 4 indicates the main pitch shapes up to this point:

**Figure 4. Pitch shapes for main events in final part of ‘Fire’.**



The snatch of ‘Alouette’ leads into a more abstract ‘horn call chorus’ with obviously processed sounds. The train whistles and foghorns are now breathy, extended and otherworldly and the sounds are transposed, time stretched, and probably filtered in various ways. The processing has been handled with care to preserve the qualities of the materials and, since they have already appeared previously, their original, normal appearance remains in listening memory. There has been a transition from a conventionally ‘musical’ orchestration of pitched horn notes, amusing to the knowing ear, to a new dreamscape that draws

'musical' properties' from a functional, 'real world' sound. Two kinds of 'musicality' converge.

## **Can you read the signs?**

### **'DroneSong'**

**Audio example 3: 'DroneSong'**

**Duration: 1:13**

'Boats drones, a drunk singing in an alley, seagull cries and ship horns.'

(Schryer, CD liner notes for 'DroneSong')

There is amusement to be had in 'Fire' but in 'DroneSong', the third movement of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, there's a moment of silliness that turns out to be more poignant than it first appears.

An enthusiastic male drunk, with occasional contributions from his more reticent sidekick, meanders aimlessly through a song (unidentifiable to this author). Behind him is a quiet outdoors ambience. The words are so slurred as to be virtually unintelligible but the slow song-form melody is easily followed, as is the general (probable) theme of unrequited or lost love. The song's melody ends with a melodic move from major third to tonic note at the end of the verse. At the end of the final verse, the singer pauses melodramatically on the penultimate note, milking the approaching cadence to the full. The tonic note is inevitable, and predictable. What's less predictable is that a clique of foghorns will leap on stage to snatch the final two notes, in the aural equivalent of a 'photobomb' prank.

The final foghorn to grab the tonic note converts it to the first note of a distinctive falling semitone motif (heard also in 'Fire'). For some of the Vancouver audience that particular sound would have had an extra twist, as a little piece of history. The distinctive mournful call is the recorded sound of the original diaphone foghorn at Atkinson Point lighthouse, at the entrance to Vancouver Harbour. By 1996, this was a sound long gone from the natural soundscape, but it might have been a nostalgic blast from the past for any

middle-aged Vancouverites among the audience. In 1976 the foghorn's well-known plaint had been replaced by an electronically operated air-horn (also appearing in *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* and evocative in its own right) and that year, 1996, the air-horn had been replaced with an automated electronic foghorn 'beep' (all three can be heard in sequence at <http://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio/handbook/Soundmark.html>). The foghorn, of any kind, was finally silenced for good in 1998.

Modernization and increased technological capabilities bring about incidental changes to the soundscape in ways that might not be anticipated or considered important in the grand scheme of things. Any lighthouse keeper would be glad not to have to hand-crank a steam-powered horn repeatedly during the early hours of a foggy night. Yet, as objects and habitual actions — and their sounds — fall out of use, their demise also silences the human experience that surrounded them. Soundmarks, as Schafer termed these aural 'natural signs' in the soundscape of a community, are not really about sound at all: they are about people, listening and noticing them, and associating them with personal and collective memory and experience. They are sounds to which we have grown attached. Many sounds preserved in the WSP and subsequent SFU recordings have by now faded from the soundscape or become less important to the majority of listeners. Sounds like the Atkinson foghorn and the player piano, were already 'living relics' when recorded. They were disinterred for contemporary, and future, ears in *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* but what they originally stood for — their social history — was going, or had gone<sup>6</sup>.

Two other distinctive Vancouver 'soundmarks' that are still very much around, at time of writing, are used more than once in the work: the Heritage Horns (known locally as the 'O Canada' horns) and the 9 o'clock gun. The Heritage Horns, ten air-horns on the top of the Pan Pacific hotel at Canada Place (near the waterfront), blast out the first four notes of the Canadian national anthem at 12 noon each day. They were moved from their original location on

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6. A work of art is not obliged to consider and address such issues, although of course it can. In a documentary comparing the 1973/1996 Vancouver soundscapes, on the CD *The Vancouver Soundscape*, Truax and Westerkamp introduce the listener to an informational survey of the sounds important to Vancouver's soundscape, including the foghorns at Atkinson Point. The documentary was made in 1996. Since 1998 there has been no foghorn at Point Atkinson.

the top of the BC Hydro building in the downtown area (the electric company funded their construction for the 1967 Expo) but, at 115 decibels, are still audible in much of the city centre and several miles beyond. The Heritage Horns are granted a movement of their own ('Horn') in *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, in addition to a couple of guest appearances in other movements. However, it is the 9 o'clock gun that becomes an aural 'leitmotif' in the work, firing in at least five of the nine movements. The gun (actually a cannon) always fires as a single, echoing shot across the aural landscape, its sound disrupting the existing ambience and echoing through what follows — similar to its presence in real life. Schryer's use of the sound is judicious and thoughtful — for *any* listener to *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, not just those already 'in the know', this sound's recurring presence creates a soundmark experience. It keeps turning up, recognizable and reliably 'the same'. A real-world soundmark acts out the role of soundmark within the context of the work.

*Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* references two other sounds that are important to the local soundscape as signposts to its culture and environment. The bald eagle's brief but piercing cry, which opens the work, is more than a distinctive sound. An eagle sighting in Vancouver city is a fairly unusual occurrence, greeted with admiration or pleasure, but the bird is emblematic of British Columbia. Only a few minutes out of Vancouver the eagles gather in large numbers each winter and, like other indigenous animals, it is central to First Nations culture and stories. The other sound symbol is also a wry reminder of the region: in both the first and last movements of *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, the sound of persistent rain is prominent, its presence serving as a frame.

### **What really matters?**

As a composed work about listening to the sonic and social environment, *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* is concerned with acoustic, or sound, ecology. This interdisciplinary approach considers the relationship between living beings and the environment, and the sonic impact of human activity.

However, there is no shouting about the ‘health’ of the soundscape in *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*. Not even in ‘Noise’, an energized collage constructed from a fast succession of layered ‘man-made’, post-industrial sounds — machinery, sirens and alarms. Although this movement draws attention to mechanical sounds that have supplanted quiet in routine aspects of our daily and working lives, it also makes a gentle point about human communication. At the beginning and end of the movement is the same recording of a male voice calling over the hubbub of a human crowd: ‘You cannot hear me? ... there’s too much noise going on’. He is asking people to stop and direct themselves towards what he has to say. The ambience is in fact not that loud (the bald eagle cry at the beginning of the work, with its natural sudden transient at a high amplitude, would be far more likely to break health and safety rules). His words are a request to listen.

The most deafening moment in the work comes when there is no sound at all. Not even a whisper. The fifth movement, ‘Industry’ is more obviously ‘thematic’ in terms of meaning than others, making use of sounds relating to ‘work’ and human industry. The composer’s manipulation of the sounds — his ‘work’ — is also clearly audible. ‘Industry’ commences with the sonic arrival of a seaplane that starts as a filtered timbre and gradually comes in to land in ‘reality’, moving on to a tree being felled, the sounds of the stock exchange, and machine noise. People doing things.

Taking the high moral ground about post-industrial ‘noise’ would be naïve in a portrait of one of the most liberal, affluent cities in the developed world — a city consistently rated as one of the most desirable locations in which to live. The quiet of non-mechanized subsistence farming is surely a far more disturbing aural picture of incomprehensible levels of rural poverty and social deprivation. Instead, *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* could be interpreted as making a different point. At just over one minute into ‘Industry’ the sound is ‘cut off’. There is a ‘dead’ silence of six long seconds before humanity returns with what sounds like the opening of metal folding doors and then an electronic till roll, totting up the cash.

That silence might just speak volumes on how industry’s cessation would *not* return humans existence to a tranquil Arcadia. Without industry, without the

working and making and building communities of human activity and knowledge, and its products, the city would be diminished, and so would its inhabitants. The diaphone foghorn and its successors, the O Canada horns, the player piano, the 9 o'clock gun? — all absent from the soundscape. The social conscience and resources needed to develop and preserve the parks and forests where people are at liberty to look up at an eagle or paddle in the sea? — unlikely to mature. The time-saving technology that provides opportunities for people to rest for a while? — not available. When 'Industry' stops sounding for those few silent seconds, *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* does not revisit a pre-industrial utopia, it warns of loss. Are these few seconds of silence a critique of some of the more idealistic tenets of Schafer's early thoughts on 'acoustic ecology', in which he prioritized a 'lo-fi', pre-industrialized soundscape? Perhaps I am hearing too much. *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited's* metaphors are in flux and open to interpretation — I think that's no bad thing.

There has been an amount of rather prescriptive polemic about how sound environments could, or should, be, and one has to tread this directive path with care and a sense of perspective. It is noticeable that some composers with a strong interest in acoustic ecology and soundscape have stepped back from making protests or admonishments about the soundscape the entire focus of their creative work (Truax, for example). Schryer's sincere concern for environment and acoustic ecology is evident in both his writings and compositions but he expresses his opinions on acoustic ecology in flexible, accommodating terms:

Acoustic ecology is all about listening and awareness of the acoustic environment and though I agree that one must indeed 'do' something with the acoustic environment, as Schafer and others have done so very well, I think there is more than one way of being 'active', including being actively passive by allowing an environment [to] be musical by itself.... (Schryer 1998)

This might appear on first reading an undirected approach to the soundscape, but it is evident from this analysis that *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* is far from that. Rather, the listener is guided, almost unwittingly, through an indirect tour of the city that mimics — in miniature — the process of 'finding one's way around' a new place: walking from one district to another,



noticing one thing or another, and coming to 'know' how things fit together in both social and sensory terms. This journey is encouraged through the careful superimposition of layers of largely unprocessed sound, each source retaining its original sonic identity and its implied (or listener-imagined) time and place. While the relationships between sounds are often carefully composed, it is rare that *overt* connections are made or melded. Instead, the approach to 'meaning' and metaphor is more tangential, and I would venture to suggest more sophisticated than is sometimes the case in electroacoustic music in general. Coming to 'know' something through personal endeavour is different from being told, and the knowledge gained this way is strong and sustainable. Schryer is an excellent teacher.

## **Blowin'**

### **Audio example 4: 'Blowin''**

**Duration: 1:32**

'Windy Forest. "Blowin' in the wind" buskers, geese, frogs, distant squirrel, quiet rain.'  
(Schryer, CD liner notes for 'Blowin''')

At last, a song in the air. The final movement opens with the wind, rising in the forest with a white noise turbulence that is almost indistinguishable from the sound of rushing water. Next comes another friendly pun: the emergence of buskers singing the refrain from Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the wind', the song adopted so widely by the civil rights movement that it became a general anthem for protest, much performed later by middle class kids with not quite so much to complain about (I count myself among them).

Finally, the rain descends again and the soundscape gradually subsides to nothing, returning the listener to their present environment, to their own thoughts, and to another time and place. Like all portraits that offer more than superficial appeal, *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* invites a number of readings, of which this was just one.

## In conclusion

It is not my place to tell you how to listen. It is your place, your world, and your pair of ears that encounters the work. Nevertheless, in considering effective tools for analysing work such as Schryer's *Vancouver Soundscape Revisited*, in which a recognisable sonic environment from the 'real world' is composed, constructed, and considerably changed and manipulated to sonic and extra-musical intent, it is helpful to consider those listening tools we might collectively share, and to build ways of making a useful, communicable critique. I believe we all have those tools already, and they inhabit quotidian listening experience.

In a 'soundscape' work the listener, I suggest, is placed in a world where ordinary listening cohabits with an attention to sonic relationships, gestures, qualities and patterns that is more characteristic of 'listening to music'. The success of the work lies in appreciating, and working with, how these two differ, and how they have been combined.

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### **Recordings**

*Vancouver Soundscape Revisited* on Cambridge Street Records (1996). *The Vancouver soundscape 1973/Soundscape Vancouver 1996*, Cambridge Street Records CSR2CD 9701.