

Sound in the Land: A Conversation with Carol Ann Weaver

Matthew Griffin

Sound in the Land is a festival/conference held at Conrad Grebel University College that aims to find a meeting point between music, academia, environmentalism, activism, and faith.¹ It was founded in 2004 by composer, performer, and professor Carol Ann Weaver. The ambitious theme of the latest gathering, held in June 2014, was “Music and the Environment.” This event featured legendary Canadian composer and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer as keynote presenter, and included performances, papers, and installations by musicians and academics from around the world. I was there for this iteration of the conference, and found its synthesis of traditional conference tropes with performativity, interactivity, and activism to be unique. Recently, I interviewed Weaver, now retired from the College, about the history of Sound in the Land, its legacy, and the challenges of bringing together such different elements under a single umbrella.—Matthew Griffin

MG: First of all, you’ve been doing Sound in the Land for a while. How has it evolved over the years?

CW: Sound in the Land, which evolved as a series of festival/conferences on Mennonites and music, began in 2004, with subsequent events in 2009 and 2014. Conrad Grebel University College has fully endorsed and supported each event, allowing it to become a full-fledged forum for the exploration of music, starting from a Mennonite perspective and travelling far beyond. Grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Waterloo Regional Arts Fund, the Marpeck Fund, and other foundations have also helped support these events.

With the exception of Mennofolk venues, which include a wide range of folk, jazz, and alternative styles, other Mennonite music festivals have

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usually tended towards choral and sacred music, with possibly a smattering of very topical ‘folk’ songs, all with a mission to be Mennonite-themed, and church-related.

However, Mennonites are a far broader group than those who may meet in churches on a Sunday morning. The broad category includes both “ethnic Mennonites” coming from so-called Mennonite roots and self-professed “confessional Mennonites,” those who may or may not come from Mennonite roots but who are very firm in their sense of Mennonite theology. When this group of people is brought together, new concepts, synergies, and interconnections can occur.

The sense of Sound in the Land has always been to begin with Mennonites and include all others who wish to come along. Traditionally, Mennonites have maintained a strong sense of cultural identity and have attempted to incorporate ideas of peace-making, justice, brother/sisterhood, community, and a responsible sense of connection with the land.

The 2004 Sound in the Land featured Mennonite ethnic/cultural musical expressions, with a solid listen to and look at Mennonite musical traditions ranging from Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico to “Russian” Mennonites (those who moved from Holland to Russia and then outward to Canada and elsewhere), to “Swiss” Mennonites (those who emanated from Switzerland but, after many persecutions, migrated to the US, Canada, and elsewhere).

What was unusual for that conference was that for the first time in history we were looking at/listening to Mennonite music via ethnomusicologists’ ears and eyes rather than through the grid of a “church music” perspective. Papers about cultural aspects of informal Mennonite music making, Mennonite folk music traditions, and Mennonite compositions of so-called “concert” music (rather than mere “worship” music) were featured.

It was essential that we create an event free from the hierarchy of classical over popular music, with all genres equally respected. We invited Mennonite-rooted composers, performers, poets, folk, jazz and alternative musicians. One attendee commented enthusiastically, “This festival really kicked ass.” The festival incorporated multiple styles and genres from a cappella singing to classical, jazz, and alternative styles, providing an open exploration as to what Mennonite music actually *is*. In the published book of collected conference writings, *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonites and Music*, Eric Friesen,

a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio host, observed that “the triumph of this volume of essays is that it resists the trap of exclusivity and accepts the widest embrace of possibilities.”

Having created a large music drama, *Quietly Landed?*, for a 1995 Mennonite conference called “Quiet in the Land,” which explored whether Mennonite women were quiet or silenced, I considered it important to create a conference, some nine years later in 2004, which could finally address the “sounds” of Mennonite people—implying musical, cultural, and finally environmental sounds. Later, the 2009 Sound in the Lands festival/conference included both western and international music—choral, instrumental, folk, jazz, and various ethnic styles, especially African and Cuban. The publication of conference essays, *Sound in the Lands: Mennonite Music Across Borders*, featured music from North America, Cuba, Africa, Russia, the Middle East, and beyond.

So, these events were the foundations on which Sound in the Land 2014 – Music and the Environment has been created. It was initially imperative for us to begin to listen to our own voice(s) as a Mennonite-rooted people and, in Eric Friesen’s words, to accept “the widest embrace of possibilities,” before we could travel beyond. Having covered aspects of Mennonite ethnic/cultural music and certain international voices, we now included these ethnic and ethnomusicological roots, while embracing our sense of global music, as we began to explore our relationship to the earth.

MG: And this is your last time doing it, correct?

CW: At the time of the June 2014 event, I was not sure Sound in the Land could continue, in that I was planning to retire from Conrad Grebel on July 1, 2014. However, conversations about a next Sound in the Land are underway for 2017. College President Susan Schultz Huxman said to me, “Sound in the Land is Grebel’s. We need to continue it.” So, with the college seeing the importance and uniqueness of this festival, I have great confidence that Sound in the Land will indeed continue!

MG: This year’s iteration really felt like a culmination, in a way, and that’s coming from someone who hadn’t been involved before. Did it have a similar feeling for you?

CW: Yes, this year's festival felt like a culmination of my efforts to envision, craft, and lead a steering committee; seek funding; invite guests and presenters; coordinate musical, academic, and logistics details; commission composers and songwriters; write script for websites and press releases; and maintain a close connection with presenters, potential contributors, and college organizers. I felt this was my last chance to create and carry out such a conference. As well, nothing means more to me than our relationship to the Earth, so this event came the most deeply from my own heart and beliefs about relating who we are and what we do to the larger ecology of our planet.

MG: How do you imagine the legacy of the festival? How could it grow/change from here?

CW: It may embrace more of the peace aspects of Mennonites. As well, further conferences may want to address justice-related themes or global community themes, embrace minorities, or discuss the confluence of a peoplehood that has traveled light years beyond the 16th-century Anabaptists (early Mennonites) but still contains a distinctive "Mennonite" sensibility of critiquing social conventions, popular culture, and state institutions, and of living by a conscience that frees one from bondage to these limiting factors.

MG: I also need to ask about the welcome event. As I said to you at the time, it was unlike any beginning to a conference I'd ever been to. The integration of performances and happenings with more traditional introductions was tremendously refreshing. It had an almost movie-trailer-like quality to it. Was there a specific tone you were trying to strike for the conference? Would you say it reinforced the ideas behind the conference in general? If so, how? As a participant, I can certainly say it prepared me to think in a certain way and specifically to be prepared for the heterogeneous nature of the conference. That is to say, the integration of the environmental, the academic, the spiritual, the musical, etc.

CW: Yes, the intention of the conference welcome was to provide a blend of presentations that would represent different tangents of the festival/conference and leave attenders tantalized, wanting to hear more and see more. I have envisioned Sound in the Land as a tightly knit combination

of musical, sonic, aesthetic, environmental, scientific, cultural, poetic, dramatic and spiritual expressions, all speaking for the earth rather than for just us people. I was particularly happy to incorporate a Zimbabwean children's choir singing in celebration of carnivores; Korean "Earth Songs"; Murray Schafer-influenced music and dance; and words from South African scientific researcher Gus Mills, Grebel President Susan Shultz Huxman, and WFAE (World Forum for Acoustic Ecology) President Eric Leonardson. We saw the bicycles ridden by two persons from Winnipeg to Waterloo, heard colloquial Mennonite poetry about the Earth, and welcomed presenters from Germany, Switzerland, the US, Canada, Korea, and South Africa. I wanted the welcome to be as exciting and enticing for attenders as was the sheer planning and organizing for all of us coordinators. I wanted all of us to feel we are part of this mega event of listening to our earth.

MG: How do you feel about the integration of these disparate elements? Does it strike you as natural? Difficult? Problematic?

CW: I was thrilled by the integration of all these elements which, rather than feeling diffused, felt somehow organically connected, inevitable. As I heard one conference attender casually remark: "Of course we have a dancer followed by a Korean drummer followed by an ecomusicologist followed by a cheetah specialist followed by a specialist in Old Colony music in Mexico. How else could we hear the earth?" The problems of bringing this range of interdisciplinary actors, academics, and movers and shakers together are the very problems we must face and resolve as we go on from here into the next years of our new century. No single group of us can solve the overwhelming environmental issues of our planet alone. The time for dissecting, compartmentalizing, and niche-ing is so 20th-century. We are into a new era of combining otherwise disparate factions and peoples in order to find a common whole, and to work as a global and local community to address the death-threatening environmental issues our planet faces if we want life as we know it to continue.

Matthew Griffin co-founded and co-directs the Electricity is Magic art gallery in Montreal, Quebec, and is treasurer of the Canadian Association of Sound Ecology.