

## Sound Around

*R. Murray Schafer*

In one of his notebooks Leonardo da Vinci questions the origin of sound: “When an anvil is struck by a hammer, does the resulting sound issue from the hammer or the anvil?”<sup>1</sup> The answer is neither, because no object can make a sound by itself. All sounds result from two or more objects moving and touching one another. Every sound is the result of a collision of some sort.

But doesn't it seem strange that when two objects touch one another, the result is a single sound? We could say that with sound, one plus one equals one. Every sound fades away and dies, or is overwhelmed by another sound or sounds. No sound lives forever.

Listening to the soundscape and viewing the landscape are two very different experiences. You are always at the edge of the landscape looking in, but you are always at the center of the soundscape listening out.

“God is a presence whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” is attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo.<sup>2</sup> In many cultures around the world the Divinity is aural, not visual. The Hebrew-Christian-Islamic God is heard rather than seen.

Moses was afraid to look at God, so he listened. Jacob conversed with God in his dreams. We might have expected psychiatrists to pay more attention to the sounds of their patients' dreams, but Freud and Jung analyzed only the visual contents. The native people of Canada took the sound components of dreams far more seriously. I knew a Dakota Indian who told me that whenever he heard the wind blowing in circles it was his grandmother calling to him, and he always stopped to listen.

From the day you were born until the day you die, you will hear sounds and you will make sounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Vol. 1 (London: Folio Society, 2011), 227.

<sup>2</sup> *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, ed. Martin H. Manser (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 133.

There are three ways to bring a sound to life. You can blow on an object, or scratch it, or strike it. But there is also a fourth way to experience sound: to imagine it. Composers imagine great sounds and soundscapes which they write down. In this way, certain sounds have been sustained with relative accuracy for several hundred years. In other cultures, sounds have been sustained by continuous repetition. But no sound lives forever.

There are five kinds of sounds that matter:

Sounds that are heard.

Sounds that you hope to hear.

Sounds that are remembered.

Sounds that are imagined.

Sounds that are missed.

In a haiku poem by the Japanese poet Issa there seems to be a paradox:

Cricket!

Although it was next door you sang,

I heard you here.<sup>3</sup>

Is the sound in the place where it originates or in the place where it is detected? Visual experiences are instantaneous. Aural experiences take time to unfold. The eye seeks. The ear must wait. But we are always hearing something. We have no earlids. We are condemned to listen. The ear has its limitations. Unlike other parts of our anatomy, the ear cannot be made stronger by physical exercise—but it can be made more discriminating.

All sounds are original. Some sounds will be heard once and never again. Correction: Most sounds will never be heard again. Correction: NO sound will ever be heard the same way again.

We see the world as a noun: that is, as an object or series of objects. We hear it as a verb, or as an activity or series of activities. Small villages used to be “orchestrated” by a variety of small industries. For instance, in the village of Sélestat (France), each street was named by activities that took place within it. There was the *rue d’Étain* (Tin or Pewter Street), *rue de la Poterie* (Pottery Street), *rue de la Cuirasse* (Armor Street), *rue de Marteau* (Hammer Street); then there was *rue des Oies* (Goose Street), *rue des Veaux* (Calf Street), and *rue des Canards* (Duck Street), all leading to the *rue de la*

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in R. Murray Schafer, *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere* (Erin, ON: Porcupine’s Quill, 2012), 229.

*Grand Boucherie!* Towns everywhere achieved their aural character by the industries within them.

Noun: object. Verb: activity.

Visual experiences are instantaneous. Aural experiences take time to unfold.

Hearing is God's gift, but listening has to be learned. "Why do we hear better when we hold our breath?" asked Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> Is it true? Try it. I used to give children this assignment: "Silence is elusive. Try to find it!" And they would go home and search the house from bedroom to cellar, but they would never find it. Often it was quiet but never absolutely silent.

Here is another exercise taken from Aristotle. "Why," he asks, "does cold water poured into a jug make a shriller sound than hot water poured into the same vessel?"<sup>5</sup> Try it. The sounds are different. Aristotle must have had good ears to pick up this subtle variation in the soundscape.

Each trade used to have its own unique sounds: the cobbler, the tailor, the butcher, the carpenter, the ironsmith, the stonemason, the hunter, and the fisherman. The sounds associated with these professions are now changing and disappearing. What soundscape collector has recorded them? Old sounds are dying every day. Where are the museums for disappearing sounds? New sounds are emerging everyday. Who is authorizing them? Who is studying them?

In the past, information about what was happening in other places came from an audible distance. A wagon approaches from over the hills or on a long, dusty road. At first it is merely a speck of sound—like the distant buzzing of an insect. As it draws closer it releases a whole constellation of concatenated sounds: squeaking wheels, plodding hooves, and finally the voice of the wagoner bringing news of what was happening elsewhere. From another direction a post horn is heard a mile or more away. The postilion signals information ahead—such as how many passengers will be staying overnight or will stay for dinner.

In those days people learned about what was happening in the world by keeping their ears open. Long distance listening was the privilege of living in the country, and to an extent it remains so today.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 7, *Problemata*, ed. E.S. Forster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

There is no long-distance listening in the city. All sounds are close and immediate. Many (perhaps too many) are too loud. There is no long-distance viewing either. High-rise buildings block our view.

The media are capable of multiplying sound by thousands or millions of times and by transmitting it over great distances—a technique I have called *schizophonia*—split sound. The media consists of speakers—human voices. They are not in the least interested in the sounds of nature outside the city limits. They are not interested in whether the sounds of nature can still be heard. When was the last time you heard birds or animals on the radio?

I once had the idea to plant microphones at various sites in the wilderness and to transmit the sounds of nature to the city. No one was interested. But this subject needs further exploration. For instance, a backyard soundscape of a running stream or of crickets in the night can persuade people that it is not as hot as they think, and could probably result in a substantial reduction of ventilation costs.

Most of the sounds in an urban environment are monologues. One does not carry on a conversation with one's radio or air conditioner, or even with a fellow passenger in the subway or on the bus. What is happening today is expressed clearly in three related German words: *hören* (to hear), *gehören* (to belong to), and *gehörchen* (to obey). We hear sound; we belong to sound; we obey sound.

When we are well outside the city and the environment is quiet, we begin to hear sounds from far and near: birds, breezes and the branches of trees . . . and perhaps some faint sounds from times long past:

When you pass by Buffalo Lake in the evening you can hear dogs barking and children playing. They are the ones who fell through the ice and drowned many years ago.<sup>6</sup>

In the early *shouwa* period in Japan people used to gather at *sinobazono-ike* pond to listen to the blooming of the lotus flowers. . . . Did they really hear them? Or did they merely imagine they heard them? Is there a difference?

“Learn this custom from the flower. Silence your tongue,” says

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<sup>6</sup> Ella Elizabeth Clark, *Indian Legends of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), 93.

Jalaluddin Rumi.<sup>7</sup> In the Finnish language one says, “What do you hear?” Not “How do you do?” In the 14th-century *Canterbury Tales* the English poet Chaucer also says: “How now, what do you hear?”<sup>8</sup>

Within Finnish culture silence is regarded as part of the conversation. Professor Michael Berry of the University of Turku has studied silence within Finnish speech, noting that “silence and respect are typical Finnish characteristics. The Finns give others space, don’t really like active small-talk, and interpret active silences to be an important part of a normal way to communicate.”<sup>9</sup> Further to this point, Professor Olli Alho, in “A Guide to Finnish Customs and Manners,” suggests that “Finns are better at listening than at talking, and interrupting another speaker is considered impolite. A Finn does not grow nervous if there are breaks in the conversation; silence is regarded as a part of communication.”<sup>10</sup>

Have you ever listened to the fluttering of the leaves on different trees? Each tree has its own voice and language. Thomas Hardy gives a whole catalog of different leaf sounds at the beginning of his novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*.<sup>11</sup>

Have you ever put your ear to the trunk of a tree and listened to the flowing of the sap? Yes, it can be heard. Have you ever stood at the side of a stream and counted how many different places the sound of the moving water can be heard from? And have you ever rearranged the stones to produce a different sound in the water? Japanese gardeners are trained to do this. “The verie essence and, as it were, spring-heade and origin of all music is the verie pleasant sounde which the trees make when they growe,” says Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Rumi Collection: An Anthology of Translations of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi*, ed. Kabir Helminski, trans. Peter Lamborn Wilson (Boston: Shambhala Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales*, [www.librarius.com/canttran/milltale/milltale231-288.htm](http://www.librarius.com/canttran/milltale/milltale231-288.htm), accessed January 13, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Information on Finnish silence has been provided by Helmi Järviluoma-Mäkelä, Cultural Studies Professor at the University of Eastern Finland, and by Erja Hyytiäinen, Communications Officer at Turku University, with quoted material found at [www.utu.fi/en/news/articles/Pages/whats-up-with-the-finnish-silence.aspx](http://www.utu.fi/en/news/articles/Pages/whats-up-with-the-finnish-silence.aspx), accessed January 19, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Found at <http://finland.fi/Public/default.aspx?contentid=160036>, accessed January 19, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872; repr. London: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Al Aaraaf.” Comment as found in Poe’s footnote 22 to the poem written



*Canoe birds. Dawn concert performance of part of "Princess of the Stars," Columbia Lake, Sunday, June 8, 2014. Photo credit: Alan Morgan*



*R. Murray Schafer improvising at Leanne Zacharias's workshop, Saturday, June 7, 2014. Photo credit: Matthew Griffin*

God is a first-rate acoustical engineer. For example, we can move our arms, our legs, and our body almost silently. Unlike machines with noisy moving parts, most of God's work is accomplished quietly or even silently. Even if I raise my voice to a shout, I can still produce only 85-90 decibels of sound—not enough to harm you. But give me an amplifier and I can kill you.

If the population of the world continues to grow—at the present rate it is expected to increase by one billion within the next twenty years or so—we will certainly have lots of work sustaining or reducing the noise accompanying such an expansion. It would seem that all of us concerned with sound reduction or improvement may be able to expect full-time employment for some years to come.

In my hand I hold a small potential sound. If I drop it, it will attract immediate attention. Dropped sounds almost always attract immediate attention. Perhaps you will remember this moment, even if you forget all the words of my lecture. Listen! (Schafer drops small object.)<sup>13</sup>

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in 1829 and published in 1879, [www.thefullwiki.org/Al\\_Aaraaf](http://www.thefullwiki.org/Al_Aaraaf), accessed January 13, 2015.

<sup>13</sup>An earlier version of this article appeared in an online journal produced by the Brazilian Universidade de Santa Cruz do Sul, <http://online.unisc.br/seer/index.php/reflex/article/viewFile/4635/3282>, accessed November 22, 2014. Permission to use this material was granted by the editor, Dr. Moacir Fernando Viegas.