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Soundscape Napa

Introduction

Note: This paper is accompanied by the Soundscape Napa soundmap located at www.soundscapenapa.com.

R. Murray Schafer, the Canadian composer and academic who coined the term “soundscape,” does not himself define the term in his book *Our Sonic Environment and the Soundscape: The Tuning of the World*. While we could safely define it as “the composite of sounds within an environment,” Schafer chose to let Walt Whitman describe the term in the opening of Schafer's book.

Now I will do nothing but listen...
I hear all sounds running together, combined,
fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds
of the day and night...
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

As Klaus Bruhn Jensen states in *Sounding the Media*, “soundscapes have increasingly been reengineered and remediated, from incidental spaces of hearing to dedicated places of listening—whether in private homes or concert halls.¹ This refers to soundscapes as performances, or as designed and perhaps recorded creations of environmental sound. However, this paper treats soundscape using Jensen's term “composite of sound”; it is the collection of sounds—intentional and accidental, natural and manmade—that make up the sonic environment of Napa.

Project goal

In this project and paper, I will use a soundmap² to demonstrate that the soundscape of the city of Napa is far more varied and textured than the average visitor, or even—and perhaps particularly—the average resident likely realizes. This soundmap contains sound recordings from 36 different locations throughout the Napa area. Although our society is much more focused on the visual, sound is everywhere, and not just the sounds of speech, traffic or even the music that is ubiquitous in nearly

1 K.B. Jensen, “Sounding the media: an interdisciplinary review and research agenda for digital sound studies”, *Nordicom Review* 27 (2006) 2 p.16
2 The soundmap in this project was inspired by the Stanley Park Soundmap in Vancouver, B.C. created by the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia accessed 20 May 2010 at www.sfu.ca/geog/geog351spring09/group07/

every shop, restaurant and other publicly accessible establishment in the city.³ Many sounds are specific to work and industry, while others can be heard in locations slightly distant from the normative background sounds of the city. Many can be heard simply by stopping and not merely hearing, but *listening* to the nuances of the sounds around one, and the sounds beneath and within those everyday sounds. Is sound an important factor in the lives of the people of Napa? It is a given that the sound of *speech* is critical, and for many people so is that of music. Other citizens may be aware of how predominant music is but less inclined to themselves be plugged into an iPod or other conveyor of on-demand personal music, or to perpetual music on their automobile radios.

Sound feeds us, whether we are aware of our sonic intake or not. Just as we are capable of eating mindlessly, we can “hear” mindlessly. Mindful or not, the sound still enters our psyche. This paper then intends to not only increase awareness of the sounds around us, but to foreground our sonic diet and allow us to question whether it is as balanced or healthy as we might wish. We have all together created our community sonic menu and that menu exists whether or not each of us enjoys every item on the menu. If we are not pleased with the entire menu, we need to confer with our fellow chefs and fellow diners.⁴ As Schafer says, “Noise pollution results when man does not listen carefully. Noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore. Noise pollution today is being resisted by noise abatement. This is a negative approach. We must seek a way to make environmental acoustics a positive study program. Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply? When we know this, the boring or destructive sounds will be conspicuous enough and we will know why we must eliminate them. Only a total appreciation of the acoustic environment can give us the resources for improving the orchestration of the world soundscape.”⁵ In our present heavily-visual society, appreciation of our acoustic environment begins with the realization that we *even have* an acoustic environment.

But how important is the role, if any, of environmental sound? Do the residents of Napa segment their day into periods signaled by the sounds of the town church, as described by Schafer in “Open Ears”⁶? Well, no. Those days are gone in our society. Only the most regimented sectors of our society—schools, the military, factories—use sound to mark segments of the day. Do Napers pause throughout the day to hear the sounds of nature, or even those of the everyday human activity that surrounds them? The answer is not found in this project but the sounds are. This project, in its current structure and brief time span, can only point to possibilities and likelihoods. But it does indicate that, not surprisingly, sound and its partner, silence, are everywhere, in many forms both pleasurable and non.

Sound is selective, and recorded sound even more so. Creating sound by intent—other than that made by nature, human activity or, presumably, non-cognating animals⁷—is selective. The creator of the sound selects the sound-making tool, the timing, the type and quality of sound, and the temporal length.

3 It is perhaps appropriate here to mention Leo Tolstoy, who in agreement quoted “some minor little German potentate” to Maxim Gorky: “Where you want to have slaves, there you should have as much music composed as possible.” Gorky, M. (author) and Fanger, D. (editor), *Gorky's Tolstoy and Other Reminiscences: Key Writings by and about Maxim Gorky*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 25.

4 L. Russolo, “The art of noises” in C. Cox and D. Warner (eds), *Audio Culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2004) p.14 expressed the hope that “the motors and machines of our industrial cities can one day be given pitches, so that every workshop will become an intoxicating orchestra of noises...”

5 R.M. Schafer, *Our sonic environment and the soundscape: the tuning of the world* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994) p.4

6 R.M. Schafer, “Open ears,” in M. Bull and L. Back (eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004) p.1.

7 Russolo op. cit. p. 13. This would include several of the families described by Russolo that contain such sounds as roars, explosions, bangs, booms, gurgling, creaking, rubbing and the wide number of animal noises.

If the sound is mediated by a sound recordist, the recordist selects the sounds to be recorded and the manner in which they are recorded, as well as the tools used for the recording. A sound editor selects from the entire body of recorded sounds those which are most appropriate for the final use of the sounds. A producer, and others, will likely monitor the sound editor and add their own selections and preferences to the process. Once a final mix or version is attained, a medium (or several media) is selected and the sounds are mass produced, the quantity selected through research of selected data. Selection continues throughout the entire marketing and distribution process, which may include radio play, newspaper and magazine coverage, television programming, and Internet promotion and discussion. Finally, the listener selects. From all the sounds and collections of sounds available, he or she selects a particular one, and then, on a fixed or portable device which he or she has previously selected, plays back the recorded sounds—at a time and place selected by that user. The user then listens to the sounds, or at least those screened, selected and transmitted by the listener's ears and brain. In short, there is selection throughout the *entire* process. As selection, or inclusion, presupposes non-selection, or exclusion, one must keep in mind that there are an unlimited number of sounds that were *not* included in the project.

Thus, the creation of a soundmap for the community of Napa involves selection. That selection process can be very precise and objective, or very intuitive and subjective. The intent of this paper is to present sounds associated with, though not necessarily unique to, the city of Napa, California. The sounds have been selected through both intent and impulse. They provide a sonic snapshot of the sound experience in this city. Many of the sounds in this project are excluded from normal awareness. With few exceptions, such as the immigration protest presented here, the sounds are part of the normal soundscape of the city and, thus “heard” on some level, but not necessarily “listened” to. The intent of the project is to isolate, select and point out a number of these “normal” sounds, and then offer them to the curiosity and interest of the residents of, and visitors to, the Napa community. My hope is that, particularly for residents, a new appreciation might emerge of the variety and significance of the sounds in our everyday environment.⁸

Our visual society

We are a visual society and most of us possessing healthy vision focus much more on our visual environment and much less on our sonic environment. We are the opposite of James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo character in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, as described by Schafer, “whose whole body was an ear” and where “in the virgin forests of North America, where vision was restricted to a few feet, hearing was the most important sense.”⁹ As stated, our ears and brains do the opposite than those of Cooper's fictional character. They *unselect* consistently unpleasant—or more likely unnecessary—sounds such as traffic, overhead planes, and such sounds as the grinding of coffee beans, the noise of food preparation in restaurant kitchens (as it is now fashionable for kitchens in many upscale restaurants to be part of the dining area), or the sounds of equipment in offices and even factories.

8 P. Oliveros, “Some sound observations” in C. Cox and D. Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 102-106. Pauline Oliveros is one who listens. As she sits and writes, she relates: “In the distance a bulldozer is eating away a hillside while its motor is a cascade of harmonics...” “Once in a half-waking state, my head was held hard against a wall by the sound of a model airplane motor. I thought some cosmic dentist was drilling for my mind's tooth.” “The rustling in the trees sounds like tape hiss until it mixes with the next plane overhead” and “I have listened to many refrigerators. There is often a flickering between the sixth and seventh harmonic” “[the] bulldozer has gone away. The birds and insects share the air with waxing, waning plane and car drones.”

9 R.M. Schafer, “The music of the environment” in C. Cox and D. Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 31.

Ironically, though we neurally ignore many sounds and are equally unhearing of more pleasant sounds in our urban areas, and although we focus more on the visual than the aural, we have more sounds in our environment than ever before. We are surrounded with the sounds of transportation, be they automobiles, trucks, buses, trains, subways or overhead planes. If we seek refuge from such sounds by retreating indoors, we find that we have not escaped, for awaiting us is the incessant sound of pre-recorded music, a homogenized sort of music which bears some resemblance to its original form but is now delivered in almost every restaurant, coffee shop, office, and business location in a manner psychologically and physiologically designed to manipulate us into relaxation, increased work productivity, or heightened shopping cravings. What we have unfortunately created is a “tragedy of the sonic commons.” It is as if the sonic world refuses to be ignored any longer, and it will force itself on us until we recognize its existence and deal with it.¹⁰ As if this were not enough, hundreds of millions of us, primarily but not totally youth in their teens and twenties, carry gigabytes of sound with us wherever we go, so that we can escape from the surrounding sounds and instead have the music of our own choice, on-demand, anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances¹¹. Unfortunately, there are well-documented dangers to those who travel with always-on music.¹²

Does it matter if we are surrounded by sound that we try to ignore? Does it matter that we favor the visual over the sonic? Marshall McLuhan said it does matter. He stated that the Roman definition of a healthy natural state—*sensus communis*—was when “all the senses, such as seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touch, were translated equally into each other.”¹³ He cautioned that the emphasis on the visual placed the emphasis on the analytical, quantitative left brain to the detriment of the intuitive, qualitative right brain. As McLuhan said, “Western man thinks with only one part of his brain and starves the rest of it. By neglecting ear culture, which is too diffuse for the categorical hierarchies of the left side of the brain, he has locked himself into a position where only linear conceptualization is acceptable.”¹⁴ The first step to restoring full access to the right brain and its qualities may be by restoring our ability to truly listen to our sonic environment.

Schafer believes that today's noise pollution is a result of Western man's fear of death: “When silence is conceived as the rejection of the human personality, the ultimate silence is death. Then man likes to surround himself with sounds in order to nourish his fantasy of perpetual life.”¹⁵ Or, as Mark Slouka states, “the grave, the scythe, the frozen clock, all the piled symbols of death, reinforce an essential truth, a primal fear: beneath the sloping hood, death is voiceless.”¹⁶ He suggests that “the soundscape will not again become ecological and harmonious until silence is recovered as a positive and felicitous state in itself.”¹⁷ In his book *Soundscapes*, Schafer quotes Indian mystic Kirpal Singh: “When there is no sound, hearing is most alert, and when there is sound the hearing nature is least developed.” Schafer continues, saying: “If we have a hope of improving the acoustic design of the world, it will be

10 M. McLuhan, “Visual and acoustic space” in C. Cox and D. Warner(eds.), *Audio Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 72. Or, as McLuhan says: “Our skulls really contain two brains straining to be psychically united.”

11 Creating what some others might consider their own “personalized portable sound pollution.”

12 Noise Abatement Society, www.noiseabatementociety.com. Deafness Research UK states that “a third of people under the age of 35 have experienced ringing in the ears, a sign of hearing damage, after listening to loud music” “66% of surveyed MP3 users are listening to louder than 85 decibels which can cause permanent damage to hearing over time.” *World Health Organisation*

13 McLuhan op. cit. p. 69

14 McLuhan ibid. p. 69

15 Schafer “The music of the environment” p. 37

16 M. Slouka, “Listening for silence: notes on the aural life” in C. Cox and D. Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 42

17 Schafer “The music of the environment” p. 38

realizable only after the recovery of silence as a positive state in our lives. Still the noise in the mind: that is the first task—then everything else will follow in time.”¹⁸ Or as Slouka quotes Herman Melville, “Silence is the only Voice of our God.”¹⁹

About Napa

Napa is a city of 72,000 people located approximately one hour's drive north-northeast of San Francisco. It is the seat of Napa County, best known for the largest of its 64 valleys: Napa Valley. The city of Napa is basically, and has always been, a farm and working-class town. In the past, the valley's major crop has been wheat, walnuts, prunes and other foods in succession. That succession appears to have ended with its current crop: wine grapes. While the city of Napa has few vineyards or wineries within its city limits, it has benefited immensely from the popularity of Napa Valley wines, and now the valley's food. Befitting its greater population, Napa has more high-end restaurants than any other town in the valley, and is currently the location of 21 wine tasting rooms and wine bars. This makes Napa a major tourist spot. Tourism has taken its toll on Napa's residents, but they recognize that tourism is vital to the economic health of the community. Accordingly, many of the sounds recorded in this project are sounds readily apparent to visitors—if they wish to be aware of these sounds. But there are other sounds more likely to be encountered by *residents*—again if they wish to be so aware. In this paper, I present the Sounds of Napa. Selected, of course.

Data accumulation and presentation

The data for this project have been gathered through observation, literature review, photography and sound recording. The project presents this data through a website and this paper. The website, located at www.soundscapenapa.com, includes an embedded interactive soundmap of 36 sound locations. Each location has its own “slide,” a mini-window with a photo of the location, a textual description of the location and its sound, and a sound player which allows the viewer, on demand, to hear the sound recorded at the specific location.

Equipment and tools used

Sound recording was done with a Zoom H2 Portable Stereo Recorder²⁰. Its simplicity of use made the Zoom H2 an ideal tool for the project. Photographs were taken with a Canon PowerShot A40 digital camera. MapsAlive²¹ provided the tools necessary for the web-based interactive map, these tools including map location markers and slides containing photos and links to sound files for each sound location. The basic map used on MapsAlive was provided by Google with an assist from GoogleMapBuddy (a program no longer available), which allowed the researcher to “stitch” together a number of high-level area maps to create one large map. Sound editing was done with Audacity.²² Source sounds were provided, generally unwittingly, by the people, animals, vehicles and elements of nature that inhabit the area.

18 Schafer “Our sonic environment and the soundscape” p. 259

19 Slouka op. cit. p. 44

20 Zoom, www.zoom.co.jp/english/products/h2/

21 MapsAlive, www.mapsalive.com

22 Audacity, <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Project locations

Possible locations for the project were initially determined by this researcher through familiarity with the area. It should be noted that this project was not intended to cover the entire Napa Valley, but simply to cover the city of Napa and its immediate environs. Some obvious tourist locations were part of the list but a conscious choice was made to focus on more ordinary sounds, since the goal of the project was to focus on the “everyday unheard.”

Once the recording phase had begun, which continued until the very end of the project, new locations were discovered. Some were serendipitous, such as the immigration protest march which the researcher was fortunate enough to encounter just as it was starting. Some planned locations were never recorded, others recorded and not used. For example, an article in the local paper mentioned a “faith circle,” a circular redwood tree grove behind a church which reportedly had an echo effect for someone standing at the center of the circle. This researcher visited the site and indeed heard the echo, an echo so immediate that it was more a resonance than a resulting echo. The echo effect was too subtle for the recording device to record, and so was not included in the soundmap. Another desired site was a local market, patronized primarily by Mexican residents and fieldworkers because of its wide variety of Mexican grown and produced products. It would have made a very colorful recording site. However, because of the current immigration tensions in the United States and the justifiable paranoia felt by many Latinos in this area, this researcher felt that a European-American walking through a Mexican market with a microphone and camera would not be comfortably received, so it and similar locations were not used.

Discoveries

This researcher's first project-related encounter with the sounds of Napa consisted of a one-hour stroll through downtown Napa. What became immediately and disappointingly obvious was that it was virtually impossible to escape the continuous sounds of traffic, even along the new waterfront walkway where I had hoped to find peace and quiet, broken only by the sound of ducks and other denizens of the riverfront. Such quiet was not to be. Once I learned how ubiquitous the traffic noise was, I decided to seek out those special places where one could escape from the sounds of traffic but still be within the downtown area. I expected to find such places along the river, or perhaps in small alcoves or hidden alleys and courtyards. They do not exist. Ironically, the location where traffic sounds were least was in the middle of a brand-new, car-filled city parking garage. This bunker-like building has a mass and design that minimizes external sound and actually provides what might be called *urban peacefulness*, although use of the term might require a stretch of the imagination. Another discovery was that the two major water fountains owned by the city were actually waterless, and thus soundless. One, in Fuller Park, had once actually contained water when it was a functioning watering container for horses in downtown Napa. Once the horses left downtown so did the fountain, and it now rests quietly unwatering in the park. The second is in the main downtown plaza—Dwight Murray Plaza—where water flowed until several years ago. Major changes were made to the plaza, and the fountain has not been active since. However, fountains have not vanished from Napa. Several new hotels have them, and in the downtown area there are two locations—Napa Square and Napa Mill—where attractive, soothing fountains are alive and well.

Most importantly, the project shows that there is a wide variety of interesting sounds in the city of Napa. In some parts, primarily outside the downtown area, there exist peaceful locations, visually attractive and often filled with the sounds of songbirds. The project also revealed that everyday sounds

—those that we take for granted so much that we do not listen to them and barely even hear them—can be more interesting than one might expect.

Future research possibilities

Recordings of many more sonic locations in the city are possible, and may be added to Soundscape Napa over time. In its post-Sonic Media module life, the soundmap could extend throughout the entire Napa Valley and surrounding areas of Napa County, and it could open up to contributions from the public. More interesting, perhaps, would be to add additional human activity to the map. Primarily for privacy reasons and the time involved in obtaining necessary clearances, this researcher avoided recording recognizable conversations, yet conversations between humans is probably our most popular, most useful, and most “listened to” form of sound. A subgoal would be to work with members of Napa’s Latino community to obtain recordings of their part of the Napa culture in a manner which eliminates any fear of “authorities” being involved in the creation of recordings and photographs.

Reflections

I feel that the partnering on the soundmap of a photograph and location with each sound recording provides an important visual context for the sound. The project could have been done as a collection of sounds without obvious connections to locations. This might have worked well as a puzzle or some form of contest, but it would have failed to provide a real-world link for the sounds. A photograph provides a visual context, and the sound recording, combined with the listener’s imagination, does the rest. The recordings could also have been presented with a *video* of the location, rather than simply one motionless image. This researcher feels that such a presentation would have overloaded the listener with too much information, allowing the visual to overpower the sonic. The method actually used, one single photograph with some helpful accompanying text, seems to strike the perfect balance for presentation of each unique, very location-specific sound.

If the enjoyment and satisfaction of the researcher is an appropriate result, this was more than achieved by the project. I have gained a new appreciation of sound, and of the sounds around me. Armed with my trusty Zoom H2, I look forward to more sonic experimentation and discovery.

Conclusion

This paper was not intended to discover if Napers are aware of the sounds around them. That would require a survey that was beyond the time frame and scope of this project. But it intended to, and does demonstrate, the wide variety of sounds that are available, sounds that range from the extremely pleasurable to the quite unpleasant. It reveals sounds that are ubiquitous but generally unheard, as well as sounds that are nearby but seldom sought. It also searched, with limited success, for oases of silence within the city. Mark Slouka mentions something that might offer the city of Napa some possibilities for the future. He suggests that silence is a worthwhile commodity. “The proof is detectable in any upscale travel magazine: there you will find exclusive spas advertising the promise of silence—no pagers, no cell phones, just the sounds of lake water lapping—as though silence were a rare Chardonnay or an exclusive bit of scenery, which, of course, is precisely what it is now,” and “As we continue to pave the world with sound, we will continue to crave what little silence escapes us, an emptiness made audible by its disappearance.”²³ Could Napa somehow develop “quiet areas,” urban

23 Slouka *ibid.* p.45-46

spaces of sonic solitude where visitors could spend peaceful moments relaxing from their wining and dining, and resting both mind and body? Perhaps there could be small courtyards and micro-parks where nothing could be heard but the sound of moving water and songbirds. It would be yet another attraction that visitors' own home cities likely do not offer, and a place for Napa's residents to pause, relax and re-energize as well.

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