INTERMISSIONS WITH THE ORCHESTRA

By Christopher DeLaurenti

Then, I grant you, the composer-conductor lives on a plane of existence unknown to the virtuoso. With what ecstasy he abandons himself to the delight of "playing" the orchestra! How he hugs and clasps and sways this immense and fiery instrument! Once more he is all vigilance. His eyes are everywhere.

Hector Berlioz,
The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz
(Ed. and trans. David Cairns, W.W. Norton, p. 285)

I have spent the last several years at orchestra concerts and ballet performances on my own singular plane of existence. Furtive, vigilant, with my eyes everywhere (for I might get caught!), and my ears carefully attuned to "playing" the orchestra, I am on a secret mission: to surreptitiously record intermissions.

Here in Seattle, symphony musicians often return to the stage during intermission, sometimes mere moments after the entire orchestra has exited. Alone or in pairs, cellists, oboists, clarinetists, trumpeters, timpanists, trombonists, and others warm up and work through the difficult passages that await them on the remainder of the program. I do not know if this soundscape is particular to Seattle or American orchestras. In my regrettably limited experience, European orchestras, after the program's first half, remain backstage until the second half of the concert begins.

Why record intermissions? One duty of the soundscape composer is to expose the unexpected, overlooked, and hidden skeins of music woven in the world around us. Culling sounds from the world for a soundscape composition subverts long-standing essentialist notions of music being comprised of notes, melody, traditional instruments (violin, guitar, drums, piano, etc.) and so forth as well as flouts contemporary expectations of abstract agglomerations of *musique concrète*-ized noise.

Throughout history, the definition of music has remained a moving target. I hope recording and presenting these intermissions in some small way abets and accelerates the ongoing re-definition of music in our culture towards moving, meaningful, coherent listening.

Making such recordings is illegal, a result of rules negotiated by the Musicians Union and various venues, yet I believe the importance of documenting these intermissions trumps antiquated copyright laws and misguided prohibitions. There's little money to be made—I doubt Deutsche Grammophon has plans to release a compilation such as *Favorite Intermissions* any time soon—and seems unlikely to damage anyone's reputation, though it might tweak a conductor's ego to find out that the best "new" music is heard between two halves of his or her meticulously planned concert program.

Recording these intermissions preserves a soundscape that could be blithely abolished by the arrival of a new music director—who might forbid on-stage warm-ups during intermission—or rendered extinct by the eventual implementation of noise cancellation technology that silences a room and hermetically seals conversations, confining them to the person next to us.

How do these intermissions sound? Each follows a similar dynamic curve, yet every intermission I have recorded is unique. One musician strolls on stage, leafs through music, and trills a few notes. Other players emerge, followed by a gradual influx of stagehands dragging chairs, shifting desks, pushing the piano. The intermission concludes with the remaining musicians of the orchestra filling the stage and adding their own individual parts to the soundscape. Fragments of notated music and music-related sounds collectively become an unintentional improvisation: different instruments sound at different times and collide melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically in sometimes interesting, novel, and exciting ways.

I'm "playing" the orchestra too, as I continually orient my hidden body-mounted microphones to capture what I hope is an interesting confluence of musicians and the crowd, whose voices intrude and obtrude, then coalesce and congeal into a mass murmur. One unexpected benefit of such listening is that I'm beginning to hear crowd sounds polyphonically. At the last possible moment—or when the ushers begin to eye me suspiciously—I rush back to my seat to hear even *more* music.

Christopher DeLaurenti is a Seattle-based composer who is perhaps best known for his soundscape composition, *N30: Live at the WTO Protest November 30, 1999*. He is a member of the Seattle Phonographers Union, an ensemble that collectively improvises with unprocessed field recordings. Christopher's music resides at www.delaurenti.net along with many music-related essays and articles. Also http://www.seasonalbk.net/addenda_feb5/ has a recording of an intermission along with other recent works of his. He is planning to post more intermissions on his site very soon.

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—George Orwell, 1984

REDEFINING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

By Milena Droumeva

In Plato's *Republic* a city-state was spatially defined by the vicinity within which the orator's voice was heard (Schafer, 1977). We can hardly imagine this classic acoustic community today, but it nevertheless demonstrates the power of sound that is still at play—whoever controls it, controls public life.

With the advancement of sound technology in the 1900s, amplification allowed sound to carry much farther than its implied or target audience. Music and speech, once ephemeral contained sound events, bound by their physical qualities, now share the modern soundscape with synthesized electronic sounds in simulated acoustic spaces. Our environment has become a "technological milieu for [schizophonic] sound" (Franklin, p. 15). Seen as a metaphor for progress, this technological 'sonic invasion' of the public space has met very little opposition.

In fact, it has radically redefined people's relationships with their soundscape and with notions of sharing space. Instead of being alert to sounds, people become passive listeners, habituated to noise and alienated from the urban environment by sonic alternatives such as personal music players, car stereos, personal mobile phones, and Muzak. We train ourselves not to pay attention to sounds and aural cues, to turn our acoustic environment off: 'Oh, that's someone else's cell phone, I'll ignore that,' and 'that's just Muzak, I'll tune it out.' Such reactions occur because of our habituation to 'background listening.' In addition, electroacoustic sounds occupy so much of the public sphere that our private space can hardly exist in that context, while truly public space inevitably diminishes. Silence is suddenly not a public right but an expensive and elusive rarity.

There are many definitions of *public* and *private*, both as geographical spaces and as socio-economic spheres. In terms of sound, I would define the public as the communal, shared acoustic space, owned by everyone but belonging to no one in particular. The private, on the other hand, is the individual, controllable/controlled space, which we physically and psychologically define for ourselves. What is important is achieving a holistic balance and a public consensus on which sounds should and should not be allowed in the public sphere. An acoustic community contains both private and public acoustic spaces, but a positive acoustic community is an "information rich" one, (Truax, 2001, p. 66) where aural cues have a distinct character and an immediate importance to the community. A balanced acoustic community also contains distinct occurrences of silence as an "enabling environment" (Franklin, p. 15) for human creativity, rest and self-actualization. It enables people to meditate or 'unwind', connect with their environment and experience the universe in a holistic way (Franklin, p.16). But where does silence stand in the world of consumerism and privatization? Is it our inherent right, or do we in fact end up 'buying' our silence at a costly price?

Many would argue that the spilling of 'private' electronic or schizophonic sounds into the public sphere and 'public' sounds into the private sphere, creates sound pollution and a diffused, disorienting and lo-fi environment (Schafer, 1977). Not only does such an acoustic community not carry vital communication, but it also discourages soundmaking and human interaction with the environment (Westerkamp, p. 227).

Background music is probably the first phenomenon to start blurring the boundaries between private enjoyment and the public milieu and it dates back to the beginning of the last century. The Telharmonium from 1906 was perhaps the first to provide background music as a 'mood setter,' to guide and affect consumer behaviour seamlessly interwoven in shared spaces. The Telharmonium ran over the telephone line, often interfering with voice transmission, and delivered narrowband, phonograph-style atmosphere music to restaurants (Weidenaar, p.134). This device thus replaced live musicians, structuring a surrogate experience in semi-private shared spaces. A similar shift followed by the 1960s with radio broadcasting. In an increasingly alienating, urban environment the radio became a surrogate background to life, a structured daily flow in which all other activities took place (Mendelsohn, p. 244). It created an artificial sense of community, a middle ground between the public and private spheres—a semiprivate space where music provides private entertainment for people, and audiences for advertisers. When radio loudspeakers in the 1920s started invading the street from shops and offices, they were banned quickly as people perceived them to be a rude imposition into their public life and shared space (Noise Abatement Commission, New York 1929). Thus the audio *medium* truly turned out to be the *message*—the very technology of loudspeakers helped create this imbalance—whoever owned the amplification system owned the public space within its reach. "Ultimately, noise problems are always a matter of *who controls a certain area, who can assume the right to probe or exceed geographic limits, and who can afford to pay.*" (Karlsson, p.11).

As community soundmarks and acoustic signals become masked with noise, private electroacoustic events take their

place in the shared public domain. And whether it is to escape or enhance the private soundscape, these technologies offer people a way to take control. With this shift in aural culture, what Paul du Gay calls 'hedonistic technologies' emerge personal music players, car stereo loudspeakers, and mobile phones. In the acoustic realm, the shared public soundscape becomes more and more layered with amplified private sounds, further engulfing and shrinking one's already reduced acoustic horizon in cities. Car stereos are a case in point—there is a subculture of peripherals manufactured especially for cars—from bass boosters, subwoofers and amplifiers to 400-Watt loudspeakers. Such technology itself is capable of reducing all other acoustic elements in a given environment to obscurity. Yet the schizophonic liberation of sound from its source also brings with it an urban prestige and imposition of individual power. In discussing the modern soundscape in his book *Noise*, Attali describes how birds mark their territory and assert their acoustic presence by soundmaking—by singing a specific, unique song (Attali, p.6). A striking parallel is the modern presence of mobile phone ring tones, as unique copyrighted 'songs', that mark our territory in the shared acoustic space. This soundmaking, however artificial, asserts a cultural and socio-economic power in the sonic environment by subjecting all who share the space to the personal 'soundscape design' of cell phone owners. Not surprisingly, ring tones have become some of the most prominent aural cues to which we are conditioned to respond, with either attentiveness or annoyance. And since it is impossible to regulate such events in a public domain, it is left up to individuals to negotiate their interaction with sound according to their perception of and relationship to it.

If technology allows individuals to control the public space within their reach, then whoever owns the public space is able to control the taste and consumer behaviour of the public. Advertisers and the Muzak Corporation started packaging amplified compressed sound in the early 1930s, as a background to public activities and places. If silence is the absence of sound, then the new silence became Muzak, as an absence of a meaningful soundscape, with its ever-flowing satellite-controlled programming.

This could not have happened if it were not for two very powerful shifts in North American society—the ideology of consumerism and the emergence of individualism. According to Cheryl Russel, the shift from the communal to the personal happened largely with the Baby-Boomer generation who were the first to grow up thinking *"for* and *of* themselves." (Russel, p.29) Individualism as a cultural phenomenon fragmented the public sphere, culturally and acoustically. It emerged from a society of alienated, self-contained and affluent people with "an unwillingness to sacrifice for the public good" (Russel, p.28). Silence, as Schafer points out, has gradually taken on a negative quality in the Western world. It represents a vacuum, the absence and rejection of [acoustic] communication (Schafer, 1977). In order to compensate for this lack of community, media such as radio and companies such as the Muzak Corporation created the industry of 'background listening.' This "music-as-environment" (Westerkamp, p. 227) envelops us in an anonymous artificial community. Proposed originally as an antidote for the 'crowded' public environment, Muzak in fact encourages an antisocial culture that silences human creativity and soundmaking (Westerkamp, p. 227).

Moreover, as Ursula Franklin suggests, Muzak symbolizes "the programmed" which prevails in our electroacoustic environment. It is "the silencing that comes with the megaphone, the boom box, the PA system…[so a planned event can take place]" (Franklin, p.15). This concept of programming plays out in more ways than one—as an aural habituation, and also as a cultural uniformity. It ties in with the idea of internal rhythm in a given soundscape, which, as Truax suggests, has "strong psychological implications for the way it is understood" (Truax, 2001, p.75). No wonder the repetitive oversimplified tunes of Muzak have bred a generation of alienated, passive listeners, 'programmed' to recognize the latest pop hit in the mall, but unable to and disinterested in making sense of and connecting to their acoustic environment.

This artificial public space and the lack of real community are heavily reflected in the listening habits of people and their relationship with the acoustic environment. Social isolation has not caused people to stop listening; on the contrary, they want to listen but with the added bonus of a consumer choice. In an intensely individualistic society the very obtrusiveness of other

people's sounds, not their loudness, has created a culture of tuning out. Since the traditional domain of listening-to-music is in the private space of the home, the Walkman revolutionized this relationship by taking the "private pleasures [of music] in the public domain" (du Gay, p.113). This new technology associated with prestige and social status allowed people to enhance their soundscape by "composing their own soundtrack" of life. (du Gay, p.92)

All in all, our society is a product of our choices and desires. Who would have thought that the pleasure of listening to music could turn into the public annoyance of Muzak? As early as the 1900s with the invention of the Telharmonium it was predicted that "the output could be wired to any place in the house, out on the lawn, down the block," (Weidenaar, p. 123). Later, in 1946, a similar description appears in George Orwell's vision of a utopian resort article: "Music, seeping through hundreds of grills connected with a central distribution stage…the radio programme can be caught, amplified and disseminated" (Orwell, p. 78). Only this time Orwell sees this phenomenon not as a cause for celebration, but as a dangerous trend producing uniform, numbing environments.

Illustrations by Milena Droumeva

Is there a sustainable way out of this vicious circle of privatization and exploitation of shared acoustic space? How can we (and should we) change our listening habits from a distracted background cycle of 'tuning out' to an interactive, engaged two-way flow of communication with our soundscape? As Ursula Franklin suggests, it is never too late to reclaim what is inherently our common good—silence. We can start by redefining silence as an "enabling environment" (Franklin, p.15), incorporating it in our daily lives as an important spiritual and/or structural element, but most of all, we should start demanding it from our governments as a democratic necessity, just as important as clean water and air (Franklin, p.18).

Ultimately, technologies are not the cause of human silencing. They are only the consequence of our alienation from one another and from our cultural and acoustic environment. Technologies are not neutral—they symbolize control and power, but their effects are also reversible and negotiable. Our social paradigm needs to shift from putting up with music as an omni-present environment to the more ecological view of receiving our environment with a conscious ear and thus better understanding the soundscape and our relationship to it. (Westerkamp, p. 227).

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