

“With the Calm, Comes Silence”

By Gregg Wagstaff

The whistle of the wind by my ear,
The wind blowing against the trees,
Trees “swish”. Sound is heard,
Forcing us back. Stopping you hard,
The wind pushing the sea - CRASH! against the rocks,
Moving clouds, in the air,
With the calm, comes silence.

Alasdair Smith (aged 10)



In the *Soundscape Journal* (Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 2000, p.19), I wrote from the Isles of Harris and Lewis in Scotland’s remote Outer Hebrides, describing something of its people and places, and the soundscape work I was embarking on there. At that time, the *Touring Exhibition of Sound Environments* (TESE) was in its early stages. Our guiding aims were to, “describe and document the social, cultural and natural make up of the islands through their soundscape” and, most importantly, to involve the local people in the process. Spring 2002—and many months later the project in the islands is now coming towards an end, with final preparations being made for exhibition in April and May.¹ Various parts to the project have evolved during this time. In this article, I will relate some of the exercises involving a class of primary school children from Cross in Ness, on the Isle of Lewis, and give voice to some of the sound poetry and sound journals that they produced. [My text here is intended to be purely descriptive and not analytical].

My ideas were met enthusiastically by Mrs. Gordon, the Headteacher of Cross Primary School. I had proposed to take a couple of classes which would engage the children in listening *to* and thinking *about* their soundscape. I was introduced to Mrs. Gibson, who taught a class of thirteen 8-12 year olds. We further discussed ways in which we could involve the children in listening oriented exercises.

In the first of these exercises (May 3rd, 2001), the class were played different soundscape recordings from around the world, including one I had recorded locally. They were asked to listen carefully to each one and write down their responses to the following questions: *What is it I am hearing? Where do I think this is? How does it make me feel? What do I think this place looks like?* For example, a recording of the slow melodic song of the Australian Pied Butcherbird was played.² Responses were; “A bird tweeting in a wood. Makes me feel calm. I think it looks like a rainforest.” / “Somebody playing a whistle. In a wood with birds singing. It makes me feel happy.” I played an older recording (from Finland) of a cow being milked by hand into a metal pale.³ Although this process was common on the Isles of Harris and Lewis 40 years ago, it is not a sound familiar to the young ears of the class. (In fact, I heard of only two cases on the islands where you might still hear this). Many commented that it sounded like a sawing sound; “A workshop. I can hear tools. It makes me feel dark and gloomy. A Blackhouse.⁴ Small and loud.” / “Metal scratching against metal.”

There was one girl in the class who guessed all the five sounds I played correctly. Her response to a recording of a market in Delhi⁵ was very perceptive, “People on a bus or people trying to sell something. It makes me feel as though there are lots of people around me. I think it is a town in India. I think the place looks bright.” The point of this exercise was not to ‘test’ the children but to open and focus their ears and their imagination. It also helped to ‘break the ice’, allowing them to tell me things and me to understand something of their individual sound experiences.

Following this, the class went outside into the playground and surrounding fields for a listening and sound mapping exercise. Each pupil was asked to find a place to sit apart from one another. Each had been given a sheet of paper with a large circle on it. In the centre of the circle was a dot. As they sat and listened, the children were asked to imagine that they were at the centre of the circle and that the circle represented the soundscape around them. They were asked to write down, draw or notate in whatever way they wanted all the sounds they heard and the direction from which they were coming. For example, sounds in the distance would go to the outside of the circle (*acoustic horizon*), closer sounds toward the middle. Sounds could be heard relative to any point inside of the circle. (I should also note that the class had previously been asked to orientate their maps in the same direction by aligning them with a familiar landmark, in this case the Butt of Lewis lighthouse. In this way it is possible to see any correlation of sound events between the maps). Children used a variety of notation methods. Some drew their soundscape using little pictograms; sheep, birds, a car. Of those that wrote down the sounds, one boy used strings of words from different directions in which one could observe a simple temporal sequence and repetitions of the sounds occurring—‘sheep, lamb, bird, bird’. In another example, arrows were also used to show where the sound moved from and to (like a car). In the case of ‘wind’, the arrow widely encircled the listener.



Photography by Greon Waanstaff

The final exercise was a group ‘mind mapping’ exercise, performed indoors on a large square of paper. Each person, including Mrs. Gibson and myself, was given a different coloured pen to use. To begin, one pupil was asked to draw a circle in the middle of the square into which they wrote their school, their class, where they were and the date. Next, each of us drew our own circle, into which we wrote our name, age and where we lived. This was connected to the central circle. From our own circles, each member of the group then wrote a list of the sounds that they heard during a normal day, from waking to sleeping. These lists radiated outwards like a sound journey and also grew to include pictures. Other circles were added from which more lists grew; ‘*sounds I like*’, ‘*sounds I dislike*’, ‘*sounds I don’t hear anymore*’—the only rules being that they grew from your own circle and were in your own colour, making it easier to distinguish later who had written what. After the basic principle had been established, the exercise became self-sufficient and the children started adding their own circles and lists, e.g. ‘*sounds I heard on holiday*’. The process was collective, participatory and creative, resulting in a final a conceptual map, which is a document of that process and at the same time, a visual artwork that explores various individual sound worlds.

At the end of the first productive day I asked the class to keep their own sound diary and to each write a piece of sound poetry for my return. Whilst I was off of the island this brief was continued by Mrs. Gibson who led her class on a little listening walk and kept their ears ‘open’. On my return visit (June 6th, 2001), each pupil came to their library to read me their sound poem and diary.

Birds in the sky –“tweet-tweet”,
Butterflies flapping their wings,
a cold breeze passes by.

Ina Fergusson (aged 10)

“...Bus grunts and snorts starting on our run home. Choir sings high then low, words coming to life in tune, makes me sleepy. Pencil squeaks over paper, a rubber taps in a beat, desperate to remove a stain. I feel frustrated hearing it. ‘Whirr’—the ball swings round. ‘Crack’—the ball hits the bat. Happy. Radio sings over the whirring car engine, voices desperate to drown out the ‘vroom’. T.V. blasts endless voices, mindless. Grass blows gently whispering in the wind. Children laugh harshly in croaking cruel voices. T.V. blasts putting me into a heavy daze, with just a buzz left in my ear. Man chats to shop girl, the strong voice drones in my ear. Heather crunches underfoot, letting out a long breath at every step. Plover shrieks to its mate, “intruders about!” Psalms are sung like a quiet choir singing slightly out of tune...”

Excerpt from Lily Greenall’s Sound Diary (aged 10)

I was delighted by their efforts. Everyone was recorded and their work now forms part of the CD publication accompanying the TESE exhibition. The children have also agreed to perform their works at the opening of the exhibition in Ness. I am grateful to Mhari Gibson for the opportunity to work with the class and for her support, especially in the production of the poems and diaries. I am pleased that she also agreed to write something about her experience of this process, which follows here. Finally, this wouldn’t have been possible without the enthusiasm and creativity of the class – thank you all.

Mhari Gibson.

My class recently had the opportunity to put their aural skills to the test in an informal two-day sound workshop by Gregg Wagstaff. The first day consisted of a series of activities which both engaged the children’s attention and illustrated to them that there is more to listening than meets the ear! On the second day (some weeks later) Mr. Wagstaff recorded poems the class had written

