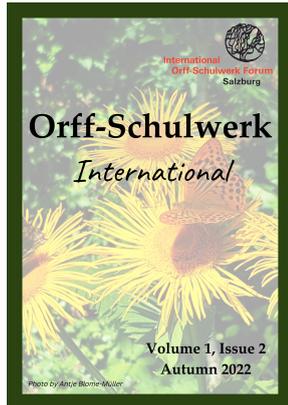




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Acoustic Communities: Children and Young People Becoming Collaborative Creators

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Acoustic Communities: Children and Young People Becoming Collaborative Creators

Duncan Chapman

In *The Music of the Environment* R. Murray Schafer (1973) talks about an ideal community being defined along acoustic lines.

"Aristotle somewhere gives 5,000 as the size of the ideal community and cites as evidence that one man can address that number of people with his naked voice- but no more" (p. 25)

Writing in 1973 at a time when environmental awareness was starting to seep into thinking about how sound and music might reflect and be influenced by the sounds of the environment (not an entirely new idea in music, see Beethoven, Mahler etc.) Schafer's concerns about the changes to the sonic environment have influenced many working in music, education and sound art to this day. But how much does this pursuit of an ideal society based on the acoustic transmission of sound have relevance to today's world of instant communication, divergent media and global musics?

This five-part talk focused on working with children and young people on projects that explore ways of engaging and creating with sounds of the environment. In this article I share some of the audio-visual material from the online talk.

Starting Points

Instead of starting with ideas about "music" these projects start with listening to the sounds of different environments. Listening, often seen as a passive activity and often neglected in some recent education, can be the start of explorations guided by curiosity.

This work also develops on ideas of "Sound-based music". Sound-based music is music where the fundamental building blocks are sounds rather than musical notes. (REF Organised Sound link).

Project 1: Possilpark to Cove Park, Urban Decay to Rural Idyll

Many of the environments where I have done projects are not the pristine and beautiful rural landscapes one would often associate with "environmental" soundscapes. Possilpark in Glasgow is one such place, yet the group of young people I worked with there, several years ago, found real beauty in the sounds collected from their local environment. Part of this process also involved working at Cove Park www.covepark.org in the rural countryside outside the city. The collaborative piece we made together was broadcast first on Glasgow based Radiophrenia radio station and later on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio 3.

This is a short extract combined with some of the photographs that the group made during the project.

Video #1: Possil

"Beauty is now underfoot, wherever we take the trouble to look" (John Cage)

It is very easy to be connected to the soundscape if you live in a beautiful location. What is interesting to me is how these young people found beautiful sounds and images in an environment which would usually be dismissed.

So ..How can we collaborate with people to explore sound and its environment when the environment is one we might not want to spend a lot of time in?

Mapping the Landscape and Sonification

One of the techniques I sometimes use in my work is sonification. Sonification refers to turning data into sound. It is often used by scientists to analyse patterns where a visual or numerical rendering would be confusing. For example, the human brain is very good at perceiving small changes in audible patterns where a visual display would be harder to understand, we can hear things being "out of time" by very small amounts. This is not a new idea. Villa-Lobos used a similar idea in his piece *New York Skyline Melody (1957)* based on 'millimetrization'. This technique, invented by Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943), and first used by him in the late 1920s, takes pictures of real-world things - skylines or mountains, for example - and turns them into musical phrases.

Here is an example of this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiF80x7KfC8>

The same group that made the movie above made the next piece on a visit to Cove Park (Cove Park is an international artists residency centre located in the countryside on the west coast of Scotland, north of Glasgow). The view is the landscape from the window of the gallery where we were working. There are three layers of sound that follow the contours of what we could see. The sounds are all played using a computer with a fader controller controlling the volumes of the layers. One of the participants follows the top of the image tracing the shape of the mountains against the horizon. This person is playing a high-pitched sinewave (pure tone) sound with a little echo on it. The second is playing the volume of a recording they made of a mountain stream outside the gallery, following the light and shade along the line where the water meets the land. The third person follows the shape of the trees at the bottom of the image with a low-pitched sinewave sound. To make the recorded piece in this movie we practiced several times to make sure we were all more-or-less in the same location.

Video #2: Cove Sonification

This way of working using technology is very immediate and addresses some of the problems of lack of technical and instrumental skill. It also uses the computer not as an emulation of an acoustic instrument but as an instrumental voice in its own right. Technology is often used in music education in ways that emulate physical instruments. I am more interested in finding other ways of using it. In this instance the computer plays what

are essentially very simple sounds and a field recording. Mixing the sounds of the environment with electronically generated sounds that don't aspire to be emulations of physical instruments but sounds that can only exist in an authentic electronic context. The other thing to note about this way of working is that it uses a single computer in a collective music making context. The computer is essentially a solitary tool, and music is essentially a collective activity. I enjoy making music by myself on my computer in the same way that I enjoy playing the piano by myself. But I find it more interesting and stimulating to make music collectively in a duo, trio or larger group.

Here is one more example of a similar way of working. In this one the drawings were made by a group of children on a long sheet of paper laid out on the floor. Working with a visual artist they made marks that tracked their journeys from home to the workshop venue and these were then used as scores to be played by the group and a professional musician from Birmingham Contemporary Music Group.

[Video #3: Oboe Lost in the Wood](#)

Part 2: Urban Journeys in London

Spitalfields Speaks. Sound, place and memory. Endangered sounds. Projects for Spitalfields music in East London.

[Audio #1: The Old House Cries Out](#)

This is the sound of Rodney Archer's house. Rodney was a retired actor who had lived in a house in Spitalfields since the 1960's. Over the time he lived there the area changed from being a run down market to a very desirable place to live. His house was originally built by Huguenot silk weavers in the 18th Century but since moving in he had done very little to "modernise" it. The house still has working gaslights on the ground floor and all the original wood interior which Rodney said contained much of its character and personality.

It is the sound of the staircase and he talks about how in the future "*that will go when it's all replaced*". He wanted me to preserve the sound for the future so it isn't lost.

Collecting Sounds and Noticing the Uniqueness

What sounds are we in danger of losing? Which sounds are endangered? What sounds would you want to keep for the future?

Personal soundworlds. The sounds that we, as individuals, strongly connect with. For me these include the sounds my children made as babies, the sounds my bees make in the summer, the sound of rain on a tent that evokes memories of childhood holidays etc.

Soundmarks..... "Soundmarks are the sonic equivalent of landmarks. They are key sound objects within a soundscape which help us to orientate ourselves." *Ears2 Encyclopaedia*

Here are some sounds collected in this project in Spitalfields:

the creaking of the stairs
songs about pigeons sung against the roar of traffic on Bishopsgate
a memory walk
the sound of the gas being lit in a dark kitchen
a tale of arrival
an early morning stream of consciousness walk from Whitechapel
the journey to school
fragments of a song from an Indian merchant ship.

"Soundmarks" of Spitalfields recorded for Spitalfields Speaks

Rodney makes me a cup of tea and lights the gaslights..... pop hissssss..... the sound is a signature of THIS place, this house and the accumulated layers of its history. Without the sound there is something missing. I had intended to simply record the sound of the house but his voice is compelling, part of the house itself, as we walk he is telling its story and pointing out tiny details that I would have missed, the way the paint is cracked, the way that at particular times the wind will whistle at this window the sound of the stairs creaking as we walk upstairs. Combined with his voice is the voice of the house, a sonic signature.
(Notes from the recording session with Rodney Archer)

Spitalfields City Farm Young Farmers Sound Treasure Hunt

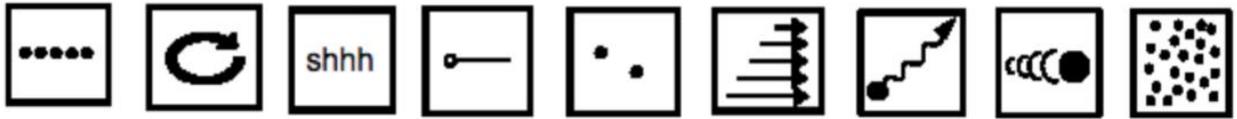
This is one of several projects where I have used a sound collecting activity as the basis for creating work. I worked with a group of young people (13 - 17 years old) who were all participants at the city farm. They went once or twice a week and looked after the animals, helped run the farm and did activities as a group. I was working for the Spitalfields Festival (now renamed as Spitalfields Music) which has been running in that part of London putting on concerts and performances from national and international musicians but also working closely with local communities.

We made a series of pieces that played at various places around the farm during an open day when the public could come and visit. The starting point was a treasure hunt to find and collect sounds.

Usually I start sessions with a number of listening exercises (some examples of these are in the BCMG resources, see references) before doing sound collecting using portable audio recorders.

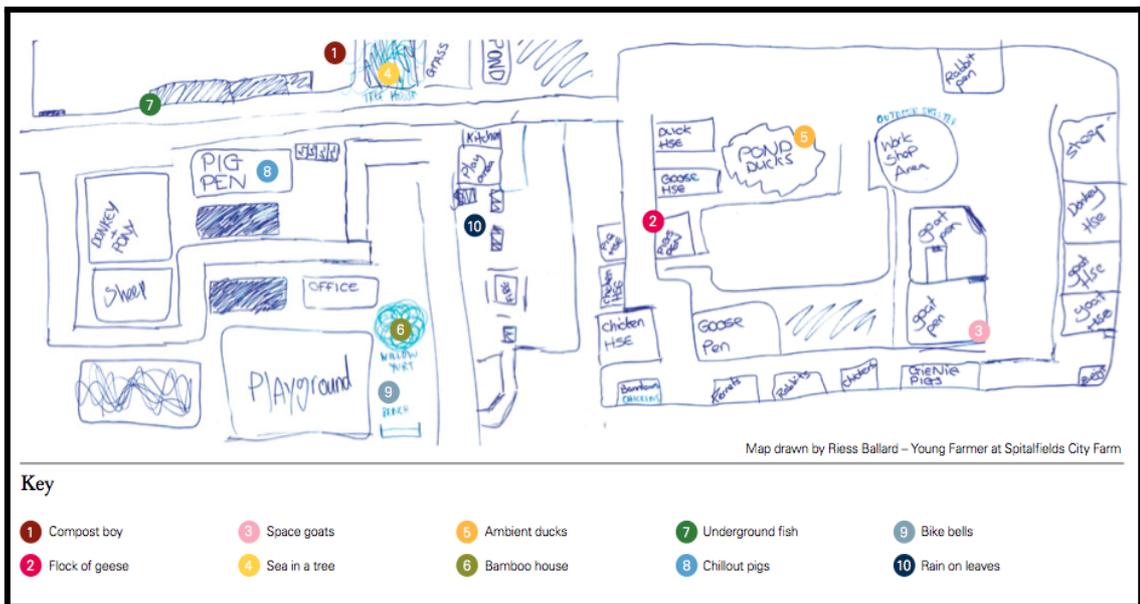
The Treasure Hunt is a good way of doing this in ways which can fire the imaginations of the participants. I start by making lists of sounds to collect before sending people out to work independently (after making sure that they are fluent with the technology they are using). I have discovered that if the list is very prescriptive (for example: a car driving past, a door closing, footsteps etc.), people tend to rush round and collect them all without really listening to the sounds. A better approach is to have a very open list of sounds to collect which allows for more diversity in what is gathered, e.g. a quiet sound, a sound made by a machine, a sound that moves, a hidden sound, a surprising sound etc.

Another way I have done this is purely visual. Here's an example from Spitalfields which was printed on a card with a space to mark when you have collected that sound.



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The pieces the Young Farmers made were installed in various ways around the farm using small MP3 players with little loudspeakers. For example, the ducks' music was in a rubber duck floating on the duckpond, the Sea in a tree was in a treehouse and the pig chillout music was hanging in a canvas bag in a tree over the pig sty. Visitors could go on a journey using the map made by the group.



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Here are a couple of the pieces:

[Audio #2: Pig Chillout](#)

[Audio #3: Ambient Ducks](#)

Some questions arising from this work:

- Is this "sound art" or "music"?
- Does it matter what I call it?
- Does calling it "music" connect with or alienate the people I want to work with?

Even though I see myself as a musician I have realised that sometimes it can be useful to

describe the work I do in other ways. To quote one of the young people I worked with at the City Farm: "*I don't think it's music, but it's really good, isn't it?*"

Interlude

Soundplant, a free cross platform tool for making music with computers.

Given the demographics of many of the people I work with and the lack of resources and instruments in many of the institutions I visit, I feel it is important to have tools to share that can enable young people to carry on working after the conclusion of the project.

In England there are increasing numbers of schools that have NO music provision at all. It seems essential to me to try and make available to those children who are inspired to participate in music any resources that I might make for teachers. Several years ago I worked for the orchestra of the Royal Opera House on a number of large scale projects which were aimed at teenage composers creating orchestral fanfares which we recorded with the orchestra and were used in place of an interval bell during performances. As part of the resources for this Nancy Evans (who is head of education at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group) and I created a series of resources for teachers. Alongside this we created a set for young people using the same activities but contextualised in different ways to enable any young people who might have "stumbled" across the project online to be a part of it.

Soundplant (PC & MAC), the unregistered version, has file type limitations but is fully functional. *Soundplant* turns the keyboard of your computer into a versatile sound player. You can assign sounds in the computer to keys, and play them using the keyboard. You can loop, change pitch and edit the sounds so you are able to make sets of sounds that can be played rhythmically or build up layers of texture.

The advantage Soundplant has over other free software for making music is that it turns the computer into an instrument rather than a recording studio. This means that it can be used as part of an ensemble with instruments and voices as well as in a laptop orchestra. The software is fairly intuitive and you simply drag sound files onto keys then press the corresponding key on the computer keyboard to trigger the sound.

The BCMG *Noise to Notes* teachers pack has a simple introduction as well as some ideas for composing with it in the classroom.



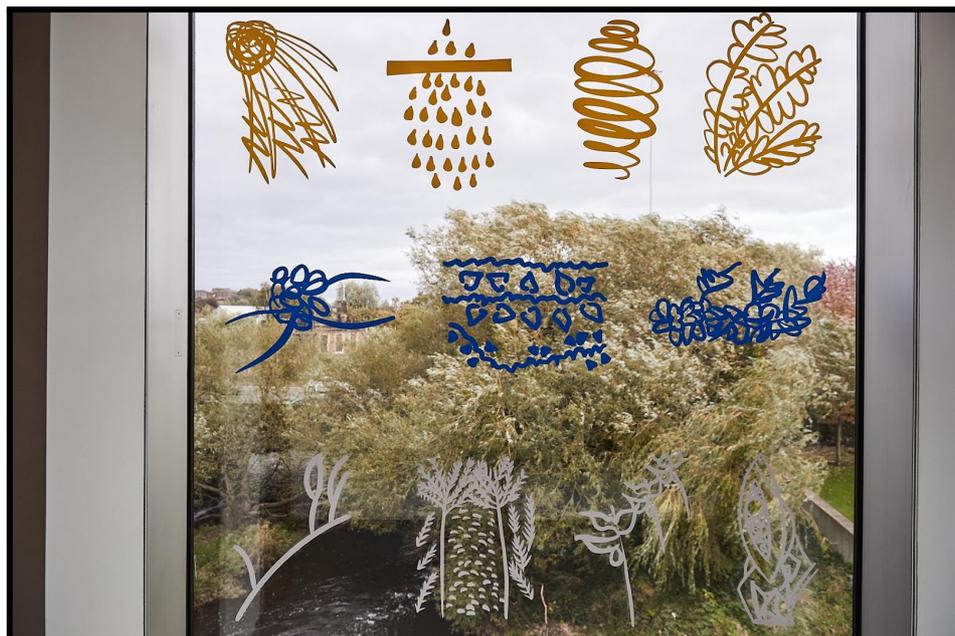
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Part 3: What Does Wakefield Sound Like ?

Sounds and images created by a group of young people at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield. The Hepworth Gallery is a contemporary art gallery in Yorkshire that houses a large collection of work and archives of the sculptor Barbara Hepworth who came from Wakefield. Relating the collected sounds of the environment to journeys to Europe (most of the group were recent migrants to the UK from India and Pakistan) and combining collected sounds with drawn images. The project put "the individual at the centre" of the process and used techniques of listening and drawing to explore responses to a new place to live.



Copyright © Nick Singleton / Hepworth Gallery



Copyright © Nick Singleton / Hepworth Gallery

Here is a movie of the images they made that correspond with the sound pieces, these were made into vinyl and put on the windows of the gallery. You could either listen to the sounds

via a QR code on your phone while in the gallery or listen online later. Covid prevented us from putting shared headphones in the space which is what I have often done in the past.

[Video #4: What Does Wakefield Sound Like?](#)

Part 4: The *Minute of Listening* Project

"In a world which is becoming increasingly visually loud, Minute of Listening helps pupils develop their creative listening skills." (from Minute of Listening website)

Minute of Listening is an ongoing project run by Sound and Music in the UK (<https://www.minuteoflistening.org/>). It grew out of a project called *Sonic Postcards* (<https://www.sonicpostcards.org/>) which was part of the education and participation work of Sonic Arts Network (now part of Sound and Music). *Sonic Postcards* worked nationally and internationally and was concerned with young people in school and community settings making short sound pieces that explored the sounds of where they live. These were collected in projects of different types and led by a mixture of musicians, composers, sound artists, field recording experts and environmentalists. The short pieces could be shared via an interactive website. Some of the website is still available here.

Minute of Listening is targeted at schools and is in the form of a daily 60 second sound clip. The project works as an online resource (it also works in an offline format with a free downloadable app) that leads you through listening to the sounds then asks some questions about them which might lead to further work. The origin of the sound isn't revealed till after you have listened to it. There is a massive range of things to listen to which vary from environmental recordings, orchestral music, collections of music from different places and work created by young people. The project is now completely free for people to have and to use.

An example is the *Tree* collection. Last year I made a set of sounds that were all collected from the woods (mostly the woods in the village where I live). Exploring a range of sounds from wind in the trees, rustling, the sound of trees swaying in the wind recorded using a contact microphone, and a fallen tree with branches .

Here is an example from the *Tree* Collection:

[Audio #4: Marimbalog](#)

Some key elements of this project are:

- Listening as an active process.
- Developing vocabularies for talking about sounds by listening.
- Exploring a diverse range of sounds and musics.
- Including work made by young people in the resources.

maintains its interest through changes in texture and character of the ragas used. Outside of drone musics, extreme minimalism and sound installation we never really have this in Western musics yet it seems to "work" for a wide range of audiences. I think that context can often be the strongest defining element in a musical experience.

Since this talk we gave a duo performance at the WOMAD festival underneath Luke Jerrams *Museum of the Moon* installation. This was in a wood including a performance starting at 11:30 pm and lasting an hour. A large (800+) audience came and listened intently with the sound diffused over many speakers distributed in the woods. The context for this provided a perfect environment for listening and the performance included the voices I collected from audiences at the festival singing the songs they associated with going to sleep. It is interesting to discover that something that might be assumed to be a "children's" or "family" performance experience is also something that many adults can connect with.



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Some Concluding Questions

- What are the opportunities for working with participants in ways that explore the sounds of our changing environments?
- What did the Covid pandemic facilitate in terms of online collaboration and what are the affordances of working in virtual and hybrid spaces?
- What should we keep from this experience?
- What can we learn from collaboration with musicians from different cultures about how music could be?
- How can we reconnect music education to musicking? (And how did it become separated anyway?)
- How can we use technology collectively to work with groups and create art?

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Web Links

Aural Diversity Project: <https://auraldiversity.org/>

BCMG resources (includes a Soundplant guide):<https://resources.bcmg.org.uk/thats-my-music/big-ears-resource-packs#tab8>

Covid Soundmap : <https://sound-scotland.co.uk/news/covid-19-sound-map>

Lullaby: Sonic-Cradle: <https://www.manasamitra.com/our-work/lullaby/lullaby-sonic-cradle/>

Minute of Listening : <https://www.minuteoflistening.org/>

Radiophrenia Scotland : <https://radiophrenia.scot/>

Soundplant : <https://soundplant.org/>

Spitalfields Speaks : <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2012/06/23/spitalfields-speaks/>

What does Wakefield Sound Like ?

<https://hepworthwakefield.org/our-story/our-community/what-does-wakefield-sound-like/>



Duncan Chapman is a composer / musician based in Lincolnshire UK. Much of his work involves collaborations with a wide range of people creating performances, installations & recordings. Recent projects include online live streaming events, curating a concert for the Aural Diversity project and performance of morning music with Supriya Nagarajan at the Jaipur Literature Festival in India.

Recent projects include work with BCMG, x-church Gainsborough, COMA Glasgow, online performances with Comb Filter (with Simon Limbrick and Adrian Lee), Humbox (with Mike McInerney). Solo work is on Silent, Takuroku & Linear Obsessional labels & Dusk Notes, (a collaboration with Supriya Nagarajan) was released in 2020.

Current work includes an album of marimba and live electronic pieces with Simon Limbrick, a residency at EMS in Stockholm, performances (with Supriya) of Lullaby: Sonic Cradle at Radiophrenia in Glasgow, Casa Da Musica (Porto) and at the 2022 WOMAD festival.

He is a mentor for Sound And Music's Listen Imagine Compose project, a trustee of Liquid Vibrations and has been a contributor to courses at York, Aberdeen, Goldsmiths, Limerick and De Montfort Universities.