

Sound Narrative: Honing a Deeper Understanding of Soundscapes

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Abstract: This essay reports on the pedagogical and curricular decisions guiding the creative activities in the author's university course incorporating field recording, soundscape-based composition, and digital technology. In keeping with the issue's theme of 21st-century composition, the article includes critical reflection and a consideration of the influence of R. Murray Schafer. It contextualizes the course in the broader context of modern compositional activities in university settings. The author's creative practice informs much of the pedagogical framework as a soundscape-based composer.

Keywords: Soundscape, Field Recording, Critical Listening, Narrative, Composition

Murray Schaefer and Holistic Listening Skills. In the late 1960s, Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer researched the ways educators could guide students to a deeper understanding of how to listen. Encouraging musicians to perceive sound broadly, Schafer (1969) wrote that “[all] sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying *within the comprehensive dominion of music*” (p. 2, original emphasis). Schafer hoped to guide nascent composers to a more holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of sound. Schafer (1969) explained that: “[students] will have to be informed in areas as diverse as acoustics, psychoacoustics, electronics, games, and information theory” (p. 3). Indeed, composers with an openness to a variety of musical and non-musical applications of listening and sound develop a more profound sense of *noticing* (author emphasis).

Aside from his pioneering work as a composer and researcher, Schafer is perhaps best known for his creative ways of fostering listening skills in students. On listening, Schafer (1992) wrote that “listening is important in all educational experiences” and that “teachers [report that] they detect an increasing deficiency in the listening abilities of their students” (p. 7). In considering the evolving needs of the nascent composer, listening plays a critical role in developing a sense of aesthetics, creativity, and artistry. Likewise, students that demonstrate the capacity to listen to all forms of sound are likely to broaden their horizons in compositional practice.

Schafer (1969) provided a critical link for educators to cultivate a sense of holistic listening competencies in their students. Sound is expressed in musical and non-musical ways and includes the nuances of every audible element in a sonic environment. Equally important to the sonic environment is silence, which Schafer (1969) defined as “[the] absence of traditional musical sounds” (p. 10). On the contrary, Schafer described noise as “any undesired sound signal” (1969, p. 17). Many of Schafer’s definitions were intentionally flexible. He sought to provide a useful framework for educators to hone critical listening ideas in the classroom and beyond. In his explanation of consonance and dissonance, Schafer (1969, p. 29) explained: “Dissonance is tension and consonance is relaxation. Just as the human musculature tenses and relaxes alternately, you cannot have the one activity without the other. Thus, neither term has absolute meaning; each defines the other”.

One of Schafer’s most compelling ideas comes from the society of sound. Here, he describes “compositions from the point of view of social systems” (1969, p. 54). Harmony fits into this classification, both musically and figuratively, as “each note [is perceived] as a human being, a breath

of life” (SCHAFER, 1969, p. 54). The conclusion here is that sound is both musical and non-musical, supported by noise and silence, holistic and integrated, and informed by the social contexts of those persons occupying a particular space. And while by no means definitive, these ideas would later inform much of what soundscape-composition would become in the 1970s and beyond.

Teacher Inquiry and Narrative Research as Theoretical Models

The classroom descriptions outlined in this article are informed by a qualitative model of research that Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009) refer to as teacher inquiry. Teacher inquiry “represents teachers’ systematic study of their own practice” (DANA and YENDOL-HOPPEY, 2009, p. 4). Drawing influence from action research, practitioner research, and similar models, Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009) sought to describe a straightforward and practical concept of analysis that “[serves] as a tool for professional growth and educational reform” (p. 5). Rigorous analysis of one’s pedagogical practice happens through asking questions, integrating theory from recent scholarship, making adjustments based on new revelations, and sharing newly acquired knowledge with peers (DANA and YENDOL-HOPPEY, 2009).

Beyond teacher inquiry, the author’s compositional and scholarly view is guided by Bold’s (2012) concept of narrative research, which she defines as “a means of developing and nurturing the skills of critical reflection and reflexivity for anyone conducting research into their own practice” (p.2). Bold (2012) elaborates that “reflection engages us in extended periods of thinking, seeking commonalities and differences and the relationships between actions” (p. 3). Like other forms of qualitative scholarship, narrative research does not depersonalize the role of the teacher, nor does it minimize the teacher’s role in understanding the perspectives gleaned from classroom practice (BOLD, 2012).

Course Description and Learner Backgrounds

Sound Narrative is a required course for university students enrolled in an undergraduate degree that integrates traditional music composition with modern applications of new media technology, and commercial styles of music production. Sound Narrative is one course in the

Composition for New Media degree that exposes students to the broader concepts of soundscape composition. Along with listening examples from a range of composers, the course requires that students leave the classroom, interact with the environment via sound walks, and collect sounds of varying lengths for later use.

Students enrolled in Sound Narrative come from a range of different musical and technical backgrounds. All students enrolled in the class matriculate in the new music composition degree mentioned earlier and many transfer from similar pathways in the Music Department at the author's institution. It is safe to assume that the majority of students had little, if any, exposure to field recording and soundscape-based composition before enrollment.

That the students had little prior background presented numerous challenges in assessing their needs, proficiency with technology, ethical considerations when recording outdoors, and familiarity with an eclectic canon of music and sound art from the past several decades. Equally important is mentioning that not only is Sound Narrative the sole soundscape-based course in the degree pathway, but its first offering also happened during the first year of the degree itself. It took several years for the program to be approved, and while exciting, this involved designing each class from scratch.

Generally, learners in Sound Narrative had some basic understanding of working with digital audio workstations (DAWs) and using computers to access course materials. Rather than using a required textbook, the author provided a list of PDFs as required reading material. The supplementary readings, each carefully chosen to support particular units or modules, aimed to provide an inclusive cross-section of perspectives from soundscape-based composers, critics, and musical styles.

The author took care to include readings and listening examples from non-Cis-White male composers in particular. In a recent article for the *British Journal of Music Education*, Bennett et al., (2018) discovered that in university music curricula, there exists a dearth of relevant examples by women composers. Within sound arts and related fields, scholars continue to find that representation and gender biases persist in ways that limit participation (LANE, 2016). While such materials are a work in progress, the author's decision to include such perspectives was intentional. Before the academic year began, the author spent several weeks looking for topical issues on soundscape composition, social justice and inclusion, music production topics, and advocacy.

Learners in Sound Narrative were required to read a collection of essays and write a personal response explaining their views on the supplementary readings. Among the topics explored include sound walks, acoustic ecology, soundscape composition, the “studio” as a creative tool, and essays from Barry Truax, Bernie Krause, Andra McCartney, Hildegard Westerkamp, Brian Eno, and many others. Additionally, course readings included reviews from Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo and the website, *Sounding Out*, a sound studies-blog that features peer-reviewed and curated writings from a broad range of scholars of color.

Much of the framework for Sound Narrative comes from the author’s creative practice in field recording and soundscape composition. In the United States, podcasts and audio documentaries remain popular as forms of artistic expression. Such work is heard on public radio broadcasts and through podcasts and streaming outlets online. Soundscape production, however, remains a relatively niche-specific genre of compositional practice, particularly among learners with little exposure to the field. In basic terms, the course explores the idea that sound, in and of itself, provides a rich framework to tell stories in compelling ways. Most importantly, the vision of the course encourages students to leave the classroom and explore their surroundings—particularly from a creative and engaged standpoint.

Before the academic year, the author sent the student cohort a few options for purchasing a digital recorder. The majority of the course takes place in a computer lab, equipped with digital audio workstations, MIDI keyboards, and internet access. In place of a formal textbook, the course required students to purchase some portable recorder, or perhaps use a cell phone with a microphone attachment. As students would be outside, the author encouraged them to find an affordable recording unit capable of recording lossless audio along with a USB connection, SD card, and a pair of headphones. Understanding that cost can be a barrier for some learners, the author adopted a flexible approach that allowed the learners to find the equipment that suited their needs. Discussions on how to use portable recorders, transfer files to the computer, handling noise, and navigating unpredictable weather conditions occupied the first several classes.

The author provided an overview of common audio file types, the process of transferring data from an SD card, importing and exporting media, and a broad overview of how digital audio workstations function. Throughout the course, students could use whatever audio editing platform they preferred. The author encouraged the learners to explore various kinds of music production

software and tailor their projects to suit individual needs. The majority of class time was spent in a project-based format. The complementary readings and listening examples required less class time, as students were encouraged to complete such assignments on their own. This is not to suggest that there was no lecture component to the course. On the contrary, most modules included a more formal lecture to introduce some of the unit's aims and provide an outline for upcoming assignments and possible challenges.

The majority of the course required students to use class time to gather sounds (both indoor and outdoor) and produce a series of short soundscape-based compositions. Beyond discussions on how to use portable recorders, the course did explore some of the ethical considerations of recording out in the field. The author explained that students needed to use care when recording nature sounds and always seek permission whenever necessary. Students were encouraged not to be obtrusive and always to respect personal boundaries with others. Similarly, the author urged students to use good judgment and to view their role as that of a sonic observer, and to be respectful and sensitive to their surroundings.

Guided Composition via Sound Gathering and Technology

Production-centered assignments usually required students to record an assortment of indoor and outdoor sounds, document their files in a list, and then import the data into a DAW for processing and arranging. Initially, assignments discouraged over-reliance on audio plug-ins and effects. Students were encouraged to find sounds that shared commonalities and to map out structural elements for their soundscape. Initially, the student's field recordings were short. This approach was intentional as the learners were expected to do more with less.

The author encouraged the class to think critically about how they could expand their horizons and use the sounds in new ways. Such an approach required that the students think about the sounds outside of their comfort zone. The author encouraged students to view their "found sounds" as musically as possible. Discussions included how certain sounds could be edited to serve a rhythmic or motivic function in the soundscape, along with building an arc for the new soundscape. By starting with shorter lengths (a minute or less), the students could use their sounds without much pressure. So long as they used all their sounds, labeled files, and sessions accordingly, and delivered a

balanced mix of the soundscape, they fulfilled the requirements of the assignment.

Eventually, projects became more open-ended. Students were encouraged to use audio plugins as models for synthesis and digital signal processing. Discussions on the types of plug-ins, their functionality, and a “before and after” listening test also provided helpful context for the students as they began editing and manipulating their catalog of field recordings. Just as early class discussions explored the ethical considerations of field recording, similar conversations explored the implications of altering field recordings in newfound ways.

Scholar Joli Jensen (2017) uses the term “follow the lilt” to describe a process where teachers and researchers guide their peers to focus on projects that go beyond merely fulfilling a requirement. Joli (2017, p. 77) writes: “[We] give our undergraduate majors the chance to do an individual project of their own choosing. Our only requirement is that it make a contribution of some sort to the world. We urge each student to draw on their personal interests and come up with a project that really matters to them”. The “lilt” that Joli (2017) refers to is the slight change in someone’s voice when describing a topic that interests them. Simply put, the lilt is a natural expression of enthusiasm that someone has for a project that energizes their creativity. In *Sound Narrative*, students had much freedom to choose the kinds of sounds they wanted to record, and produce them in a way that reflected their personal identity. Moreover, once the students brainstormed with each other about possible topics, their excitement on project choices could be heard in classroom dialogue. For example, one assignment asked students to respond to the prompt “I Am”, which opened the pathway for many different expressions of being through sonic practice.

The author encouraged students to reflect on such issues. Guiding the dialogue included questions on what a soundscape is and what it could be. Though there is no definitive answer for such open-ended questions, the course aimed to explore such concepts and inspire a healthy exchange of ideas, both creatively and intellectually. In one instance, a student produced a sonic work that incorporated recordings of a younger sibling, along with the rambunctious sounds of a family gathering. To underscore the field recordings, the student composed a musical cue with sparse piano textures and ethereal synth parts. The family sounds The finished mix drew the listener into a personal connection the student has with his younger sibling along with a deeper expression of his cultural background. Just as the course inspired students to get outside the classroom, it also required them to think carefully about their creative process as nascent composers and express some

vulnerability as human beings. Both anecdotally and in course evaluations, students expressed appreciation for a supportive atmosphere to be creative.

Once students became comfortable with the foundational aspects of soundscape composition, later modules incorporated discussions on surround-sound and binaural processing. Though specific assignments did not require students to record in surround or to deliver a 5.1 or 7.1 mix, they were encouraged to explore binaural and surround-sound panning concepts using automation and specific audio plug-ins. Such ideas were not meant to replace traditional audio engineering concepts; instead, they were meant to expose the students to the varied creative possibilities available using modern recording techniques and music production software.

Discussion

Sound Narrative served as a helpful introduction to the rich possibilities of recording on location and giving students a broad understanding of the creative and practical implications of soundscape composition. The introduction to soundscape composition was intentionally flexible, supportive, and designed to inspire learner curiosity and reflective thought. Moreover, the course provided an entry point to a kind of compositional practice mainly unfamiliar to the majority of students in the class. The overarching goal was to give students some agency over their learning, encourage them to be reflective and sensitive to their surroundings, and to use their imagination on ways to use sound for storytelling purposes.

Indeed, the goal of any course is to facilitate healthy and positive learning experiences. As it pertains to 21st-century compositional practices in higher education, one must consider the aims of the department and institution. The author's institution is a mid-sized public university in the United States, with a music area that has little in common with a traditional, conservatory-styled pathway in composition. The author's institution draws broadly on commercial and contemporary styles of music from different parts of the world. Similarly, the department has legacy programs in audio engineering and music education. Thus, the course and degree as a whole must fit the ideological purposes of the department and university

Conclusion

As with many aspects of modern compositional practice, how students assimilate field recording techniques and soundscape composition varies from person to person. Sound Narrative is the sole course of its kind in a degree that strives for a balance of traditional and contemporary composition with media. Sound is the focal point here. Critical listening and applied research are encouraged through supplemental reading and class discussions. A point worth mentioning is that the role of technology in Sound Narrative, while necessary, is meant to be taken with some openness. Rather than emphasizing a specific kind of software, or field recorder, it is the imagination that is prioritized. Students are encouraged to become thoughtful, reflective practitioners with an appreciation and respect for their surroundings. They are encouraged to view technology as a means to the end and to use the tools that are available to them, just like the environments they interact with each day.

As this is a preliminary report on the author's pedagogical work, subsequent iterations of the class will reveal areas of strength and points needing revision. The hope is that the discussion offered here offers helpful perspectives for peers and colleagues to use in their teaching and learning. Educators considering a course like Sound Narrative may want to examine its relevance in the humanities and for ethnographic research. Educators and practitioners in mass communications and media studies may find some of the issues here relevant to their pedagogical mission.

Likewise, field recording and new media composition need not be an entire course unto themselves. The ideas presented here may be most applicable in a single project or as a supplement to existing course content. Just as the author aimed for a healthy and positive learning environment, the suggestions outlined here aim to be helpful and to contribute to the discourse on 21st-century compositional practice and pedagogy.

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