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Annea Lockwood

Interviewed by Cathy Lane

I first heard 'A Sound Map of the Hudson River' in the late '80s when a dub producer with very wide-ranging tastes played it to me—at that time I hadn't heard much work that used field recording and I found it difficult to compute how anyone had released a CD of a RIVER! I loved everything about it including the aptly titled record label—Lovely Music. Over the last two decades, little by little, I have learned more about Annea's incredible contribution to the music of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in a career which spans three continents and has encompassed performance art, acoustic composition, installation works and numerous collaborations as well as teaching. Her series of works with glass, rivers and pianos share a sense of play as well as a sonic curiosity that goes deep beyond the surface and the expected.

I interviewed Annea in Brussels where 'A Sound Map of the Housatonic River' was installed at Q-02 Werkplaats as part of the opening festival for the Sounds of Europe project.

You have been an active composer over much of the the second half of the twentieth century. How did your interest in field recording start?

It goes back so many years. I was studying pure electronic music in the Köln school style with Koenig. I turned away from that because it was too systematic. I'm not a systems person in that sense and not particularly abstract in my work with sound, and I also found the sounds really boring. So when I figured that, for me, ambient sounds, environmental sounds, 'happenstance' sounds were a lot more complex in their interior structures, events and content than a stack of oscillators and some ring modulation, and then got interested in the concrète school, which was the alternative scene at that time—it was very natural to move into doing live recording of various sorts. I started incorporating bits of live recording into pieces I was doing with Bob Cobbing and the other work that I was doing for the choreographer Richard Alston when he was running Strider. Shortly afterwards I found glass—I was looking for a raw material that would be vibrant and unfamiliar, a rich resource that was unfamiliar to people's ears so it doesn't have to be strung along with other sounds to make a composition, it is already beautifully composed.

So the early recordings weren't outdoor sounds?

It was a real mixture, I didn't think of it as field recording—it was just natural resources that were to hand—it was a delight to go round recording, taping things and I didn't place those sounds in a special category.

What made you want to be a composer?

My mother and my immediate environment when I was growing up in Christchurch, New Zealand. I was very lucky, my mother was altogether a very creative woman, a semi-professional pianist; she had studied Dalcroze and done some choreography and she started me on piano very early as was sort of the norm for kids in that environment. When I started to make up tunes, as all kids do, she taught me how to notate them which made all the difference, and then my local university department, some of whom were family friends, began to encourage me. My piano teacher's husband was a violin teacher and had a small string orchestra and I played in it and began to write for it... I was just really lucky. From then on there I had no doubt what I was going to do.

I'm not sure all kids do write tunes for the piano! I don't think so...

Seems to me they're always walking round humming...

Did you train in New Zealand at first?

Yes, I did a four-year bachelors degree at the University of Canterbury and then three years at the Royal College of Music in London with Kendal Taylor, a wonderful piano teacher, who knew I wasn't going to be a pianist, so he gave me a really rigorous analytic education, and composer Peter Racine Fricker, who let me loose and sent me off to Darmstadt really quickly—I couldn't have been luckier. Then my last studies in instrumental writing and electronic music were with Koenig for a year; he was superb and very open-minded.

So when did you make your first recordings?

Around 1964 or '65. I was living with somebody who had a little Uher and we had a collection of mics. And I was also beginning to do some work at the Zinovieff studio; I was good friends with Peter's assistant, Peter Grogono, and eventually we did some psycho-acoustic experiments together. I was able to do mixing at the studio and I did a computer music course there. I also longed for a Nagra in those days, but I could never get enough money together.

So you were making recordings and using them as material—when did you jump to engage with place or making a relationship to geography? Was there a transitional stage and how did that come about?

I grew up with a father who was an avid climber and skier so we had a little hut up in the Southern Alps in New Zealand, three hours away by car from Christchurch, a region of really wild rivers. We were taught techniques like how to cross rivers so as not to get swept away. I used to go to sleep at night in that little hut listening for kiwis, which were rare even then, in the bush across the river. I was listening to the river through the river, so rivers were a major part of my childhood. There was a particular river that I love even now, the Waimakariri, and that was in my deep acoustic memory. Then in the mid '60s I read *A View Over Atlantis* by John Michell, all about ley lines and wells, a wonderful book, and he talks about an old Peruvian custom of taking patients who are mentally ill to sit by rivers for the day. This made me think about whether the healing effects were a mixture of sound, water vapour in the air and visuals, and what would happen if you extracted just the sound from that—do those sounds have a particularly calming effect on us? So I started something called the 'River Archive' which was to be a collection of all the world's rivers, creeks and springs—totally absurd, but we were travelling all over the place. Friends would go off to the Himalayas with recording stuff and bring back some sounds for

the River Archive and I never got totally serious about it, but I made a collection. In about 1973 or '74 I started doing installations in The Kitchen in New York. I spread out loads of old mattresses on the floor and pumped a little ozone, which was, of course, probably illegal then and definitely now, into the room, so everybody got a little high and beautiful old 19th century postcards that I had collected of the rivers were projected. I called that series of installations 'Play the Ganges backwards one more time Sam', which was a title very much of its era.

So the recordings came from a number of people?

Yes. I was recording little water sources in Wales, Pauline Oliveros sent me something from Massachusetts, and Carolee Scheemann brought me something from somewhere exotic, maybe India, and there were many others.

What were you thinking and feeling about these recordings of rivers?

I loved their structural intricacy—I had been working on that for four or five years by then, with glass. I was listening very closely to sounds which I engendered but which I felt the glass itself took over. My hands would move, the glass would resonate and the form of the resonance and the partials that emerged would keep changing from the energy of the glass itself more than from what I was doing, as if they were small pieces of music; the rivers were even more gloriously independent of me, with complex interior structures. I watched people's responses as they listened over a period of time and the way that people would just sort of drift into a very relaxed state of mind. I was also investigating why water sources are so magnetic for us other than the obvious fact that we start life in amniotic fluid. I began to think it's a combination of the brain being engaged by the constantly changing details in the texture of moving water combined with the apparent overall repetition. It's not quite repetition but it feels like it. So the body is relaxed by the repetition, but the brain remains engaged because of the details.

Have you ever worked with processing, or tried to slow the recordings down?

On and off. I don't do any processing apart from EQ in the soundmaps because with these my intention is different from compositional work. But in a piece I did recently called 'Jitterbug', for one of Merce Cunningham's last works, I did a lot of underwater recording of insects up in the Rockies in Montana. But I also took an underwater recording I'd made of the Danube at Grein in Austria where there are vortices and a very powerful current. This underwater recording is

delicious—it phrases itself, it's absolutely amazing—it produces this little rush of sounds and then it's still, and then it picks up again—perfect phrasing. I set that up in stereo, so on one side of the theatre you are hearing that in real time, and on the other side I transposed it down a little bit so you are hearing two sets of interrelated pitches—it's a canon basically.

Are rivers intrinsically different—is the Thames very different from the Danube?

It's not so much that the Danube has an 'ooo' sound and the Thames an 'aaa' sound, but that the cultural differences in the environments feed into the whole ambience. Also any one spot on the Danube sounds different from another spot: the gradient, the composition of the banks and riverbed, how much energy and friction there is, whether it's cold—all these parameters affect the sound and make it impossible for any one river to have an intrinsic characteristic sound.

What made you decide to try and record a river from source to mouth?

In 1981 I was working for a small dance company which was dissolving and I went to do a job interview with the personnel manager at the Hudson River Museum, a very nice museum in Yonkers, New York on the river bank, looking across to the cliffs of the Palisades, a very 19th-century romantic landscape. The personnel manager suggested I make an art proposal. So on the spot I thought—I'm looking at the Hudson, why don't I just record the whole river? They found me some funding and I started going up and down the river.

So how did you approach that?

I started from the premise that I would be making this piece for New Yorkers, most of whom never manage to hear the river. They can't really. They see it. Some actually get out on it in boats, so they hear it, but for most New Yorkers it's almost entirely a visual entity. When you're looking at that river you have no real sense of its power so most people have no intimate, tactile contact with the river. So while I was recording the sounds that captured me as I moved downstream I also hooked up with various people whose lives were tied up with the river, and who had actually physically experienced the river through their bodies and could talk about it that way.

What sort of people were they?

The most obvious was a river pilot. The least obvious was an Adirondaks National Park ranger who'd spent a lot of time in and out of the river

on various pieces of business; fishermen who were totally passionate about different parts of the river; an old farmer who remembered Native Americans using an old ford upriver and being flooded and travelling by boat to see his Grandma when he was a kid; an upcountry judge who remembered the incredible cold of the river at the end of winter, and the sound of the ice breaking up and of logs being rolled downriver.

Why didn't you integrate the interviews into the main recordings?

I wanted to let people drift fully into the sounds of the river without being distracted by stories. In the installation situation the river sounds are coming through two wall speakers in stereo and the interviews are separate, coming through headphones. So if you're listening to the interviews you can hear the river in the background but if you're listening to the river you can't hear the interviews. I had changed my mind on this by the time we got to the Danube.

How long did the Hudson project take?

I think it took a year—and the installation was two hours long, double the length of the CD.

How did you choose the places to go and record?

Strictly by ear. I don't think of any of these projects as documentaries. I mean there are huge gaps in the recording of the Hudson river—it's about 350 miles long!

Presumably you didn't walk the whole way?

I covered the whole thing, one way or another. But there are long stretches where the water is controlled by little dams and so on and there just wasn't any sound so I would just skip over them. Fortunately people didn't expect to hear the whole thing, you know, miles and miles! I chose my sites the way I still do: the sound of a site has to be really satisfying to listen to and make my ears prick up. If I'm lucky, it should be a sound I've never heard a river make before. So then I just set up the mike and put on the headphones. I was recording the Hudson on a Nakamichi cassette deck and then a Sony TCD5M with a Sennheiser cardoid mic with multiple heads. I'd just sit back for up to half an hour at a time, letting the tape run.

How many hours of material?

I really don't remember. With the Danube about 80 hours of material. The Hudson I don't recall.

How do you deal with 80 hours? It takes 2 weeks just to listen to it!

Lots of coffee! Well, I'm sort of not in a hurry with these projects, which is very nice. For the Hudson river I had a schedule but it wasn't a great rush, and with the Danube it was entirely my own project—I generated it myself and funded it myself. It was a matter of luck when and where it was first to be presented. I would just go downstairs—my studio is in the basement—and take a cup of coffee and expect to spend the next 5 to 6 hours listening. And what I'm doing is selecting sites which are really engaging and vivid to me—really alive.

Do you find it difficult to disassociate yourself from your recordings and listen with completely fresh ears?

No, because just the physical space being so totally different helps a lot, and so does the elapsed time since recording—it doesn't seem to be a problem.

So when you are selecting material is there a lot of editing?

Not much. I aim to do recordings which need minimal editing—I love editing actually, it's fun, but I want to put the river around your body. This means I need to remove myself from the river and from you as much as possible—so minimal editing is about removing myself from the process so you're not aware of its being a composition. Similarly I don't play with the sound unless it's to EQ traffic out or to bring out some little skein of patterning in a mix of water sounds.

The 'Sound Map of the Hudson River' CD came out in 1987. Was the Danube the next one?

I had decided "enough of rivers". I didn't want to be pigeonholed as the woman that does rivers or burns pianos, so I completely set rivers aside for a good twenty years. Then all of a sudden in 2001 I wanted to be working with those sounds again, and the Danube just came into my mind. It rises in the Black Forest and it goes to the Black Sea in Romania and the Ukraine as a huge beautiful delta. The oldest channel is the southernmost one in Romania, and the shipping one is the middle channel. The Ukrainians are busy trying to take the shipping away from Romania by building facilities in the northernmost channel. There's a lot of politics around that.

It must go through many countries?

Ten as far as I recall—Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine—and all those different languages!

How long did it take?

I made the first recordings at the end of 2001—in all I think there were about four trips of 5–6 weeks each over three years.

Were you alone or with a translator?

Just Ruth, my partner, and me. I rented a car and would just find somewhere to sleep about 4 or 5 pm. And only once in all those trips did we not find somewhere to sleep in time!

Where was the installation first shown?

At the Donau Universität, in the Donaufestival, Krems, Austria as a 5.1 installation with the speakers arranged equidistantly, so there is no prioritizing, no front or back, and the sound just moves around the speakers. I love that particular choice of channels; there are so many options in terms of how the speakers are aligned and which speakers to use. I prefer to suspend them so that people can move freely. There is also a huge map on the wall. Anyway it started in Krems, and then went to Ulm and has kept moving. It went back to Austria for a couple of years to Orth, where the headquarters of the Donau-Auen National Park are. They are beautiful—in a little castle near the river with a little wooden interior stone tower—beautiful acoustics and a lovely view. Then it went to Hungary and now it's in Romania—it's been going downstream. It's finally reached the delta.

Were there language problems?

I was able to use a combination of English and German; that usually worked. I would ask people two questions in one or other of those languages—"What does the river mean to you?" and "Could you live without it?" I wanted to explore why rivers draw us so powerfully. I was talking to people who were on the river, by the river, and sometimes making their living through the river, and who were passionate about the river. I would get them to respond in their own language and then I took all those interviews back to New York and found people who could translate them. But the reason I merged people in with the river is because I came to see that we need to recognise how deeply integrated we are with our environment.

What sort of reactions have you got from listeners?

Fairly often people talk about being really immersed in the sound, feeling within it. What I'm hoping for these days with the Housatonic, which is basically pure river sound, is that listening to one river might

evoke memories of a personally favourite river that the listener loves. Out of that may come some sort of caring about the river, and then out of that some sort of awareness of issues like pollution, conservation and access to water comes into the foreground—but indirectly—I don't like to be didactic. Listening to the river and re-experiencing the river's flow can bring it into your being and remind you of its nature and its being. So next time you hear about a river in trouble you might want to help out.

That's a lovely idea. So the Housatonic is your most recent river?

I finished it last year. I wasn't expecting to do another after the Danube but this was a commission that I wasn't going to turn down. It's such a nice idea—a museum dedicated to a river. Unfortunately plans for this museum were set aside.

Do you think this is going to be your last river?

I don't know. From having felt that I don't want to be pinned down as a woman who does rivers I have got so much more concerned about the health and sustainability of rivers. So now I am finding I want to touch on that, still without being didactic, but maybe a little bit more clearly. I spend summers in Western Montana in the Rockies because Ruth, my partner is from there. There's a river there, the Clark Fork, a tributary of the Columbia, which is a mighty river. It was dammed in two places, and had been for a very long time; one dam was 100 years old and it was beginning to fail. It had accumulated a huge very poisoned reservoir behind it because upstream is a very large open copper mine, so arsenic, zinc, lead, and copper had all overflowed the tailings pool upstream down into that reservoir, and people were finding arsenic in their drinking water. There's been a long struggle to remove it and the last piece was taken out last year. The local people are thrilled, the river is flowing freely, the fish are beginning to come back already and everyone is rejoicing. So I thought I would really love to work with something like that, perhaps finding a way to stream it live.

You are not tempted to go back to your New Zealand river?

It's just that it is such a long commute! I haven't thought about doing that. It's not practical for me. I would need to spend a lot of time there, as I like doing rivers over an extended period of time.

Over the time you have been making recordings, you've obviously gone through many different types of technical set-up. What do you use at the moment?

I'm using a Sound Devices hard disk two-channel recorder, a nice Shure stereo mic with three different settings and Maggie Payne's hydrophone—she's incredible, a magnificent composer who teaches at Mills College in California, and she has a really nice hydrophone made from US Navy surplus, so well made and very sensitive, and bless her heart, she lends it to me for weeks at a time.

Your recordings have an incredible clarity and a beautiful translucent quality—they are so present. Do you listen on headphones?

Yes, I have to know what's going in. A lot of what you heard last night was very close miked. There was one passage that I will never experience again: it was a totally natural fade out. I was recording on the Pootatuk, a little tributary of the Housatonic and I didn't think about the fact that the Pootatuk has a small power station upstream that releases water erratically. Sometimes I set up a tripod with three independent legs, and I like to put the mic on the stand in the water when I can. So I had my Shure, which is not a small microphone, and it was sitting in five inches of water, maybe, and I was trying to get an impression of a wide expanse of active bubbly water. I recorded for about 20 minutes, and towards the end of that time I noticed things were getting quieter and quieter. I looked at the mike and it was only about a quarter of an inch above the water! There had been a water release upstream which was quietening everything down—the result was the most incredible fadeout, bubbly activity fading as the ambient sounds reappeared. It was so beautiful! But a lot of the time I'm recording really close up. On the Danube in Croatia I set that same tripod, with a different mic, an Audio Technica, out in the same depth of water in amongst lily pads where there were frogs galore. I tried to get really close! My mic was just inches away from frogs.

So you are in the river?

Yes.

Oh, ok, now I have an image of you in waders! Have you ever fallen in?

Not yet. Sometime I'm sure it will happen. I wouldn't mind falling in, but I would hate my gear to fall in!

So are you working on other things at the moment?

No, I'm not. I finished a piece on Guantánamo about year ago, and that was a lot of work. I finished the Housatonic at the same time, so I took some time off to generate some new ideas.