



Hildegard Westerkamp

Interviewed by Cathy Lane

I met Hildegard in Darmstadt, famed for its school of serial composers including Stockhausen, Boulez, Nono and Berio, who participated in the famous summer school in the 1950s. She is part of the 46th Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music as well as a keynote speaker at 'The Global Composition Conference on Sound, Media and the Environment'. I am a long-time admirer of Hildegard's work. Her works were among the first compositions recognisably using field recordings that I ever heard as a student. Sometime in the mid 1990s I bought 'Transformations' and the 'Vancouver Soundscape' double CD. While the World Soundscape project has obviously been extremely influential in the development of sound culture and art over the last four decades, it is Hildegard's work that remains fresh and relevant. I must have played 'Kits Beach Soundwalk' to hundreds of undergraduates, but more recently Hildegard's key role in the development of feminist sound art has become more and more apparent.

In between lectures, workshops and the interview we chat and lunch in the park. It's a very enjoyable day.

How did you first get interested in field recording?

My first real introduction to field recording was through listening. When I was part of the World Soundscape Project (WSP) my job was to write down what was on the recordings, so I know every second of the World Soundscape library! In Vancouver we had over a hundred recordings, probably 50 or 60 hours worth, and with the European and Canadian archive recordings as well there were maybe 300 to 400 hours overall.

So you weren't making any of those recordings?

No not at the beginning. When I started, the people who made the recordings (mostly Howard Broomfield, Bruce Davis and Peter Huse) had worked for Schafer for a while and the initial Vancouver soundscape recordings were already completed. So no—I was not a field recordist with the World Soundscape Project but I listened to all the recordings, which taught me to hear the recordists' perspective and listen in on their approach—a very interesting experience. Some years after working with the World Soundscape Project I created my programme *Soundwalking* for Vancouver Co-operative Radio. Initially I worked with two other women (Joan Henderson and Anne Holmes) and we broadcast a weekly half-hour programme for about four or five months in early 1977. After I received funding from the Canada Council I extended *Soundwalking* to a weekly one-hour programme and continued to broadcast for about 10 months. That's when I really began to learn recording. It was a completely different approach from that of the WSP—low tech because I couldn't afford a Nagra. I had bought one of the first portable cassette recorders, the Nakamichi, which was huge! It needed eight D batteries but it also allowed more flexibility as I didn't have to change reels, and the quality was pretty good with two AKG microphones. The headphones I wore in order to monitor the recordings were also pretty big! The recording that you heard earlier today with the fog horn was my first recording ever. I chose the beach because I felt most comfortable there, less public and exposed. So I started in a place that felt right and it happened to be on a foggy day. It was really my very first such experience. I spent a good hour there recording the waves and the foggy atmosphere and right away—intuitively really—I began to experiment with moving the microphone, in search of anything from larger spatial recordings to very close-up ones.

You were the only woman involved in the WSP and you've already said one of your jobs was to catalogue the recordings. Did you feel at all marginalised?

I was probably young and naïve enough to think “I’m just training here”. I was so enthusiastic just to be there that I was willing to do anything really. But the main focus of my job was to research for Murray Schafer, as he was writing his book *The Tuning of the World*. Even so, I remember there were moments when I had to make clear that I wasn’t there just to Xerox or type.

When you were listening to all those recordings what was it in them that particularly engaged you and made you want to make your own?

I discovered a love for that type of listening. It was opposed to what I experienced as very constrained and anxious listening in my own music studies where I had to identify things, and was expected to be ‘good’ or ‘talented’. When I first heard Schafer speak, it felt like an absolute liberation from the classical music stream. The fact that we could sit in silence in the studio for hours listening to a recording of, to give one example of many, birds waking up at dawn was so magical. Plus I learnt about the dawn chorus, the birds, that particular place, the microphone and how it was stationed, and also about sounds that interfered—it was a constant learning process. Each recording was a new learning experience. As a relatively new immigrant I learnt about Vancouver through the ear and suddenly realised that I had been hearing these sounds but not noticing them or understanding how they connected me to the place. It intensified my listening towards the environment. We would listen in the studio, and afterwards when I noticed those same sounds in the environment, I would hear them in a new way, slightly differently because they were never quite the same as on the recordings; and of course I heard them from a different perspective, in a different context. I realised then that I had always been a listener. I felt at home in an atmosphere where everyone was always noticing sounds, always pointing out acoustic phenomena, commenting on the field recordings and their quality, and so on. In such a working context with inspiring colleagues you can’t help but develop a greater affection for a place because now you know it on a perceptual, sensual level. You are now inside the sound. When you are around people who relate to the world through the ear, your own ear becomes more aware.

So after all that listening, were there things that you specifically wanted to record? Did you want to do it differently in some way?

My *Soundwalking* programme was very different to what we had done in the WSP. I wanted to record the experience of moving through a space for the radio, and that’s why I decided to use my voice. I felt if

I just put environmental sounds on the radio people would block them out like they do in daily life and, as I was in a bit of an educational phase at that time, I really wanted them to listen. So my voice could be a bit like that of a sports announcer—the mediator between the environment and the audience with the voice filling them in on things that they couldn’t otherwise know. It would place them more squarely inside the recording context, inside their own listening, so I imagined. I would talk about the weather, the seasons, things that were going on and might be audible but not necessarily identifiable. I never talked a lot, as there were often long periods where I was silent and listening. The perspective of the recordist as listener-mediator between environment and radio audience prevented me from ever getting lost in the recording process. The concept and structure of the radio programme gave me a healthy boundary and context in that regard.

I also became aware that the microphone has its own voice; that is, the moving microphone could guide the radio listeners to a certain extent and my voice would fill in the details. For example if I was in a mall going from one shop to another it would be obvious that I was changing environments, but I might say something like, “now we are at Eaton’s” or “this is the shoe department”. I would record anything from natural environments to a factory, a shopping mall, a park to quiet mountain atmospheres and all the time balancing my voice and the environment.

You mentioned something today about tuning your voice to the environment?

When I listen back to those radio programmes now I can hear my voice tensing up or relaxing, getting louder or quieter, intuitively adjusting to the noise levels and social context of each environment. It’s a really interesting document in that regard.

There are a lot of field recordists who don’t seem to include voice or human sounds as part of the environment, and there are some places where voices are so much a part of the sound of the environment. For example, in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, where they still speak Gaelic, the sound of the language is really very windy and it’s a very windy place, and you feel that the whole language reflects the environment. Do you think a ‘field’ sounds more lovely with human voices in it?

No not necessarily. The idea to use the voice in *Soundwalking* had everything to do with the radio context. But I also think that I was literally trying to find my own voice, as a composer, as an artist and as a woman in the face of having worked with five guys. I had researched for Schafer’s book, but during the productions of our early WSP documents

I mostly watched my colleagues and listened in on the process. Yes, I learnt a hell of a lot at that stage. But I was just a huge listener and didn't know my own creative voice yet—in a way I was the 'perfect female'—listening intensely and not asserting her own voice—yet. The radio programme allowed me to continue listening in an intense way, but also to explore voicing and expressing, creating and producing.

What do you feel you look for in a recording?

It depends on what it's for. The *Soundwalking* programme allowed me to choose what I wanted to record. So it depended a bit on how I was feeling. If I felt like going into a public space where people might approach me I would choose that. If I felt a bit shy and didn't want to be approached I would go to a more natural place. I would just follow the ear and make recording choices according to what was happening at the time and then, in the studio I would deal with what I got! I edited and mixed the recordings down to an hour.

At other times I would make very directed recordings because of a commission perhaps; but when I was in India, for example, I recorded *everything* because it was just full of stunning soundscapes. Usually, though, I no longer go out recording for recording's sake. Besides, I already have accumulated masses of sound materials and I don't currently see the sense in adding more.

I have often recorded birds, bells and the rural soundscape at my parents' place in Germany because I was missing them. That kind of recording is very casual. I just put the microphone out on the back terrace and let it sit there, not really paying much attention to what was being recorded and then listening back later. But, interestingly enough some of these recordings appear years later in my piece 'Für Dich—For You', composed at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. This was based on the poem 'Liebes-Lied', by Rainer Maria Rilke which was translated for the composition by Canadian writer Norbert Ruebsaat.

I don't have an overall systematic approach at all. Nowadays I often find myself not wanting to record, because I usually monitor my recordings on headphones, which separates me from the environment—even though paradoxically I'm in the middle of it. I really just want to listen these days and don't want to carry around a piece of equipment. This could be related to the fact that I haven't done that much composing recently. When I have recorded it's been for a specific project.

You mentioned that you usually know what the recording is for. Has it always been like that? How do you know whether you're going to make a composition or an installation for example?

I often don't know. I usually do exactly what I did with the WSP; I document all my recordings, write it all down and get to know what's there in detail with a timeline, making indications and exclamations like 'good' and 'horrible'.

So it's a little bit like a score of your recording?

In a way, yes. With analogue recordings this kind of documentation was very important. It helped to find the location of the sounds on the reel-to-reel tape or audio cassette. Nowadays it's easy to locate sounds in a digital recording file—if I put it into Pro Tools I can quickly go through it and just sort of spot check, and know approximately what's there. It's a very different listening approach. Taking the time to write it all down seems a little anachronistic under today's circumstances, but the listening required for such a task gives you a different relationship to your recordings. It reveals in detail the difference between your recording experience and the actual recording results. You may think in some instances that you got a really good recording because your experience during the process was positive, but when you listen back to it, it may not be as good as imagined. Or you may think it's nothing but it ends up being a great recording of something you hadn't even anticipated. Often also, you hear things while listening back to your recordings that you never noticed while recording. Those kinds of detailed listening processes are time consuming, but I feel attached to spending that time because it is part of, and inevitably tends to contribute to, the composing process. I just feel at home with this type of listening—spending the time. During that time I begin to get ideas about what I might want to do with it all and, for example I might select certain sounds for processing because the recording quality seems good enough for the purpose.

Often I forget about the parts I didn't actually use in my compositions. They just disappear from my memory unless suddenly they re-emerge for other contexts. For example, there was a raven recording that I was sure would get into 'Beneath the Forest Floor'. It's a beautiful recording of two ravens flying through this old growth forest while calling to each other as if in a dialogue. It never made it into that work. For some reason it wasn't appropriate. The pacing of that piece somehow didn't allow for it to be included. Fifteen years later the complete recording landed in its original, unchanged form in 'Für Dich—For You' as if it was recorded for this context.

Do you feel you can ever listen to your recordings without the memory of actually being there doing the recording?

No, I don't think so, the experience of being there figures into the compositional process. We had a bit of a discussion about that in the workshop earlier today. I asked the participants, "why would anyone be interested in listening to your recordings?" The experience gives the recordist the passion, but is there enough in the recording alone to transfer that passion to the detached listener? To make that leap and draw the listener—who may be far away from the original context of the recordings—into a passionate experience of listening. I always talk about exaggerating the recording/listening experience when it becomes part of a piece. Sound processing has that function for me—you highlight the musical quality of a sound or soundscape like a caricaturist highlights a face, so that people are drawn into the musicality of the sounds. I love the process of exploring the musical aspects of my recordings because they are full of surprises and tend to reveal completely unexpected new sounds. The experience of such sonic transformations is magical and powerful, as it is not unlike finding a whole new instrument, a new voice that takes on its own importance in a piece. I've found that in almost all my pieces, there will be at least one sound that becomes significant in that way. That's why I love processing.

I'm not a purist about sound recording, not like nature recordists, who venerate their recordings and will leave them unchanged for a good reason, especially if they are documenting existing natural soundscapes and are concerned about the ecology of an environment. But some composers who work with environmental sound and want to respectfully represent a soundscape tend to have too much respect for the 'purity' of their recordings in my opinion. They don't dare to alter any of the sounds and thus don't dare to let their 'composer's voice' speak. In a soundscape composition we walk a complex and fine line, attempting to find a balance between the voice of the recorded environment and that of the composer; all this in the interest of understanding, highlighting, and questioning our relationship to our sound environment, our listening and soundmaking.

My question is always—what does the recordist do to explain and reveal the context? This is important in the context of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies. That's why I find it surprising when recordings are presented without information about their context, without naming animals, landscapes, seasons, locations, without any kind of clear perspective that would help to put listener and recording into some sort of relationship—an essential aspect of any work done in acoustic ecology. If we put out recordings without contextual information, then what are they? What is the message?

What's your favourite or most interesting recording?

There are recordings that I really like and come back to. I remember one whole hour where I explored a small bay on one of the islands on the Pacific West coast of Canada. I started on one side where certain rock formations gave the water sound a specific quality. Then I went to the other side where strange plopping sounds were created by the water in a very different rocky shore environment; and then the beach had its own specific character of small, calm lapping waves. That recording is about an hour and a half long and absolutely gorgeous. I cleaned it up a bit, shortened it, added a few barely audible sounds that came from quite different sources, but had some sonic qualities similar to the water sounds, and thus added a spark of brightness equivalent to the emotional spark I felt at the time of the recording—and it became a kind of ambient piece. I called it 'Coon Bay' after the name of the location. In the end it is neither a straight sound recording—although much of the time it sounds like one—nor a composition.

There's one recording I keep remembering, that I hated initially and loved later. I was in a residential area, recording airplanes for a programme called 'Under the Flight Path', as part of my weekly *Soundwalking* show. As I was recording, this guy who lived across the street from where I had placed myself, came up to me, curious as to what I was doing. He started talking and I became totally exasperated, as I felt his voice as an interruption to the airplane sounds that I had come to record. He had ruined my recordings, or at least that's what I thought. I didn't listen to that recording for a long time because the experience had upset me. But when I finally listened to it I realised that I had captured a most amazing conversation between us about living under the flight path—he talked in a beautiful deep voice with an Italian accent—while the airplanes were repeatedly flying over our heads, interrupting our conversation!

Then sometimes I love recordings because they really worked well in a piece. There is another recording I love featuring an eccentric rich American woman who was living in the Banff Springs Hotel. When I was at the Banff Centre for the Arts I was working on a sound portrait of Banff. So I went to the hotel and started recording upon entering the building. Very soon into the recording this elderly, but spritely, lady came up to me, asked me what I was doing, was totally intrigued, and she ended up leading me through the hotel which she knew intricately well—it is like a radio play—a very beautiful recording that I'll never use.

How do you feel you come into your recordings?

It's to do with the way that I approach making the recording. I might start with the overall ambience but then something gets my attention and I will zero in on that. The moving microphone is very much my preference—guiding me and the listener through an environment. I always monitor with headphones while recording the sounds, so that my listening guides the microphone. Even though I might have a certain intent beforehand, often the environment suggests all sorts of other possibilities and I will follow some of those spontaneously. Water is always a good example: imagine yourself at a river, recording it from a more distant perspective and then zeroing in on a certain part of the water flow by gradually moving the mic towards it, until you are so close that you can only hear this one water gesture. Then you move equally close to other flow formations and explore the fabulous variety of individual water voices that make up the sum total of the river sound at that location where you are recording. I remember on my first visit to Japan, walking along a sidewalk in Tokyo, when I suddenly heard an incredibly dense high frequency noise, mixed with music, from across the street. I looked over and saw that a door had opened, the sound spilt out and then disappeared when the door closed again. It was a Pachinko palace! My Japanese colleagues laughed at my surprised reaction, as they of course had experienced this sound many times. Eventually I went into one of these Pachinko palaces to make a recording. Initially I walked through it just to get the general ambience, and people didn't even notice I was there. They were too busy gambling. They didn't even seem to notice when I ended up placing my microphone really close to the many moving, clinking little silver balls, which created the individual sound ingredients of that dense high frequency ambience. This was a really intense recording experience. I was making exactly the same moves that I would make if I were at a river, but here I was dealing with a sonically overpowering, addictive social environment.

You also use your voice.

Yes the voice has been a strong ingredient. There have been periods though when I really didn't want to hear my voice. In my latest piece 'Once Upon a Time' I asked my grandchildren for their voices instead, but because I write a lot and think in words I do end up using my voice quite a bit.

You use it in one of your best known early pieces 'Kit's Beach Soundwalk' which is a great piece I really like it!

It's an odd piece.

You didn't make it for radio did you?

I didn't make it for anything originally. No, that piece is significant to me because it really happened out of absolutely nowhere. I had just been quite angry about something and was literally standing on Kits Beach in Vancouver when I heard this subtle clicking sound on the shoreline. It was so striking that it managed to catapult me out of my anger. I rushed home to get my tape recorder and was back in time to record it before the tide changed the sound. Then the story emerged a few days later, also out of nowhere. I can't remember the order but I think I made the tape first, started to filter, equalize and then play with the high frequencies, and then the text came after. It all just fell into place over about seven days. Originally it was a performance piece. I had composed the tape part, and the spoken part I would perform live as if it was a radio programme. Since the CD *Transformations* came out I've been lazy and I don't do it live any more.

There were some years where I did a lot of live performance. The 'India Sound Journal' recordings and narrative about my experiences in India, that you heard at Dartington, is also a live piece—I've never recorded the entire voice part, although for one or two pieces I have done it. My intention was to develop it further—but it sort of got stuck in one place. I have another, earlier such piece called 'Cool Drool', a satirical piece about muzak.

Over the time that you have been working there have been a lot of changes in technology, attitudes etc. You have talked about how your practice has changed but how do you feel the thinking and wider art of field recording has changed more generally?

I would say that each generation finds its own creativity within a new technological medium and comes up with new ideas. Although I find it fascinating, I am easily overwhelmed by today's technological presence, I don't want to have to explore it too much any more. It's incredible to work with young people and see the ease with which they handle it. I'm very interested in seeing how they follow up with our work in acoustic ecology in the face of this very technologized world. I want to find out what the concept of ecological balance might mean to them, so I push the idea of listening no matter what

the technology is. I think it's important that they get in touch with their own listening so they understand why and how to use the technology and try to find their own voice within that. That's my main aim now—to animate others in the way that I was animated—it's the listening that drives what we come up with in the end and how we understand that relationship and each other as a result. The products that they come up with—well I'm not sure I even know enough—one needs another lifetime to listen to all the sound pieces, recordings, soundmaps and other links on the internet etc. that are pouring out into the digital sound world these days.

Whose work do you admire?

Too many to name... There are many field recordists who are making excellent recordings, better than I have ever done. It is what they do with it that becomes the issue. David Dunn and his important work with the pine beetle, Stephen Feld's work with the Kaluli (Bosavi) people of Papua New Guinea, Viv Corringham's exploration of place with voice, walking and recordings, Nigel Frayne's sound design work in Australia and many other parts of the world, Helmi Järviluoma and her colleagues in Finland recording and studying the six European village soundscapes, Keiko Torigoe in Japan, initiating and documenting 100 Japanese soundscapes worth preserving, Sabine Breitsameter's amazing radio documentaries she made in Germany in the '80s and '90s, Bernie Krause, Gordon Hempton, Douglas Quinn and their excellent and large collections of nature recordings—and many more, all of whom are in some way contributing to raising awareness of listening and of issues in our world soundscape.

You mentioned in the lecture earlier that your influences were Cage, Murray Schafer and Pauline Oliveros.

They were the big ones.

Andra McCartney is developing your soundwalking work.

Yes, she is taking it into new arenas of action and research, placing it more clearly inside an academic context, which is a challenging task. Soundwalks could be perceived as being diametrically opposed to the academic context, but Andra manages to combine the perceptual, experiential focus of soundwalks with the important insights, creative thought and development of environmental, socio-political awareness they spark.

What is your favourite field?

Such a question—whether it is asking for a favourite piece of music or bread or shoes or animal or cities—I find impossible to answer. It depends... is my first response! It depends on context, time, place, perception, state of mind and heart. If I would choose acoustic ecology as my favourite field, I am talking about the interconnection of many fields. Perhaps I should say that it is the space between fields, the bridges, the balancing points, the lines of departure or connection, the in-betweens which are my favourites.