VSO

The Concert Hall.ca

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VSO Connects

Questions?

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https://theconcerthall.ca/the-music-room

Acoustic Ecology

Acoustic Ecology is the study of the relationship between people and the sounds in our environment. It's important to recognize that the sounds we make change our acoustic environment. Some contemporary musicians view the recognition of acoustic environments (or 'Soundscapes') as a form of composition; the practice of heightened, focused listening while walking outdoors is referred to as a **Soundwalk**. These concepts were pioneered and popularized by Canadian composers R. Murray Schafer and Hildegard Westerkamp, among many others.

https://naisa.ca/radio-art-companion/an-introduction-to-acoustic-ecology/
https://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/WSP/index.html

Sound Density describes the dimension of musical texture related to how many sounds are happening concurrently. An instance of high sound density would involve many sounds happening together (eg. a symphony orchestra playing all together), and 'low density' would describe an instance of few sounds (eg. a solo voice and guitar). This relates to the composition activity in that not all students will be playing at the same time. The class and PSMS may decide to affect sound density by appointing a soloist, having small sections play together, and contrasting with full-group sections. We can also apply these terms to our acoustic environment; ask students how many sounds they can hear happening at once on the soundwalk and in the classroom.

Works Referenced

- Beethoven *Symphony No. 6*: https://youtu.be/p4CCU2-AFZE?t=1166
- Butler *And Birds Do Sing*: https://theconcerthall.ca/episode/sturm-und-drang-haydn-butler
- Respighi *Pines of Rome*: https://youtu.be/mdve48nptNk?t=924
- Westerkamp *Talking Rain*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZF88yrK5Gg

Additional Soundwalking Resources

- A guide to soundwalking: https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/writings/writingsby/?post_id=13&title=soundwalking
- Soundwalking as ecological practice: https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/writings/writingsby/?post_id=14&title=%E2%80%8Bsoundwalking-as-ecological-practice-
- About soundwalking: https://newmusic.org/soundwalks/
- An example from 'Early Years' education: https://icsearlyyears.edublogs.org/2014/10/14/listening-and-wondering-on-a-sound-walk/

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Guide to Soundwalking

"A Soundwalk is a silent walk along a planned route to experience a location's ambiance and underlying rhythms. All too often the sounds of the environment pass by unnoticed because of our uncanny ability to shut them out. A Soundwalk invites participants to actively listen, opening ears and consciousness to the complex orchestration that the environment is composing at all times. It is a musical-sonic adventure that reveals the banal to be extraordinary!"

- From Vancouver New Music, 'Soundwalks'. Presented in association with the Vancouver Soundwalk Collective (2020). https://newmusic.org/soundwalks/

As the leader of this Soundwalk, your goal is to help students stay focused on the acoustic world around them. This will be achieved by choosing a suitable route and pace; pause in places with particularly interesting sounds and don't hesitate to move on from a place if students are getting distracted. You may choose to reuse prompts from the guiding activities below to refocus the attention of the group. Hildegard Westerkamp likens leading a soundwalk to improvising in music; "Although [you, the leader] knows the basic 'piece' or sonic route, in the end it invariably gets altered and 're-composed'"[1].

Suggested Process

Plan route ahead of time.

1. To get started, walk with the class for a short distance. Don't worry yet about walking in silence.
    - Once outside, pause. Ask students to stand in a circle/spread out and pose the following:

Guiding Activity 1

        - Try to stand as still as possible. Listen closely; what sounds can you hear your body making?
        - Now, try to move your arm without making any sound. Try to take a step forward. Is it possible?
        - Once again standing still, **turn your attention to the environment.** What sounds do you hear? What's the loudest? The fastest, the softest, the slowest, etc..?
        - Explain to students that the sounds we make contribute to the sounds in our environment.

[1] Hildegard Westerkamp, "Soundwalking as an Ecological Practice", The West Meets the East in Acoustic Ecology. Proceedings for the International Conference on Acoustic Ecology, Hirosaki University (November 2006).

2. Move on to the next location. As you are walking, draw students' attention to any changing sounds. Are certain sounds getting louder? Are the sounds of your footsteps different from what they were before?

Guiding Activity 2

Pause. Ask students to stand in a circle/spread out.

- Going around the circle or calling on students individually, create a verbal list of sounds. Go through the following categories:

    A. Traffic sounds (cars, busses, planes…)

    B. City or urban sounds (construction, industrial sounds…)

    C. Sounds from other people (the person next to you, other students in the class, people outside of the class…)

    D. Nature sounds (wind, birds, rustling of leaves…)

- Optional: Use a timer and ask students to focus on one sound for exactly a minute. After, discuss which sound they chose and why. Did it change as they listened? Was it more or less difficult than they expected to stay focused?

4. Continue on soundwalk. If class size is conducive, verbally engage the class in listening as you walk.

Guiding Activity 3

Pause. In pairs or small groups, have students experiment with the following:

A. Cupping ears to make them bigger.

B. Closing their eyes.

- Discuss: Can they hear more this way?

5. Continue. Pause in different acoustic environments and repeat any of the above guiding activities as desired.

6. Conclude by explaining to students they will go on their own individual soundwalks at home. Hand out composition project and split the class off into groups to brainstorm ideas.