

Commentary

By Hazel Meades

City Living can be split into three sections: the soundscape of my hometown Saffron Walden (henceforth referred to as the homescape); the musique concrète of London; and the New Cross soundscape. The act of music-making is innately reflexive in nature (LaBelle, 2015), thus providing an ideal medium to explore and reflect upon my experiences within these different spaces, and I was largely inspired by the work of soundscape artists such as Hildegard Westerkamp (e.g: *Kits Beach Soundwalk*), Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien* series (*Le lever du jour au bord de la mer*, *Presque rien avec filles* etc.), the study of proxemics (e.g: Perek, 2008), and Pierre Schaeffer's studies (e.g: *Etude aux chemins de fer*).

Rather than focusing on micro sounds in detail, as Westerkamp did in *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), I aimed to capture a macro overview of the soundscape in each section, with a focus on the psychological significance and context of the environment. Similarly to Luc Ferrari's non-static approach to his second piece in the *Presque Rien* series (Caux and Ferrari, 1995, p. 13), I often recorded while on the move. *City Living* can consequently be viewed as an extensively exploratory sound walk with the explicit purpose of bringing psychological experiences into auditory view. The composition is, in essence, a record of my journey from space to space.

The opening and closing sections of the piece aim to follow the principles of soundscape composition as outlined by the practice and writings of Barry Truax. The sound sources are initially grounded within recognizable contexts in all three sections; my understanding of the environmental context heavily influenced the development of the composition; and I found that paying close auditory attention to these environments came to influence my experiences of them over time (Truax, 1996, p. 63).

I approached the process of recording and

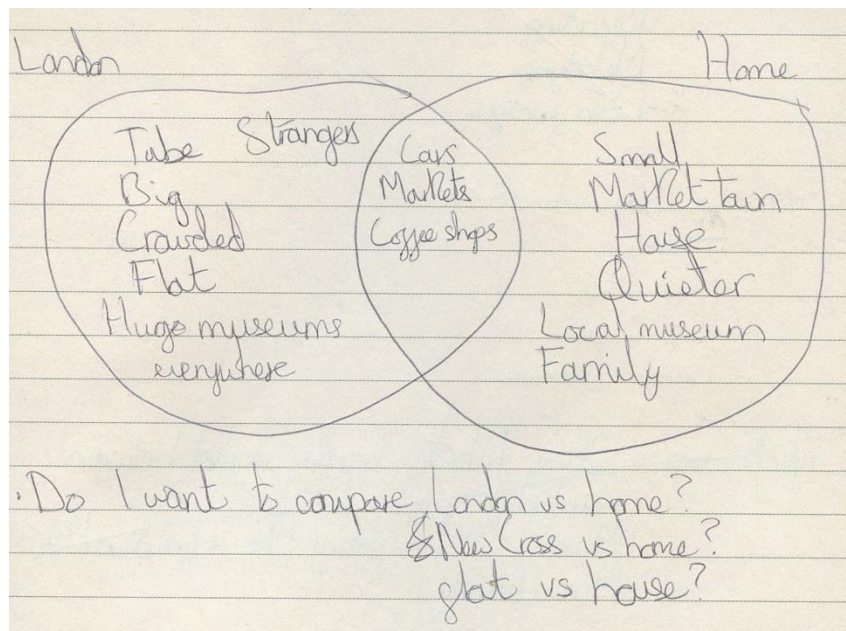


Figure 1 - venn diagram comparing soundscapes.

structuring my composition in terms of sound locations. I made an initial list of the sounds I experienced at home, in London and in New Cross, and compared the similarities and differences between the two soundscapes (see figure 1). Through the process of composition and recording this broad locational focus was narrowed down to that of a focus on egocentric space (CIRMMT, 2014).

Recordings were captured with my Zoom portable audio recorder. Carrying the device on my person enabled me to record the walk to lectures, tube travel, and other experiences and sound textures that I might have otherwise missed. I made the decision to not include impersonal sound locations such as supermarkets, libraries and museums during the process of organising recordings, and grouped the sound files in folders according to location for later mixing purposes.

I returned to my hometown for reading week and dedicated a significant amount of time towards capturing the soundscape of the local area. I quickly realised that the sounds I had listed were not all-encompassing of my psychological experience of the homescape, and chose to record several new textures, including the distant sounds of breaktime at the school behind my house, and family chatter within the busy local Wetherspoons. The opening homescape section (0:00-5:24) of *City Living* is designed to provide a montage of microenvironments within the wider context of the homescape. These microenvironments include that of my family house (0:00-1:33), the many schools that populate town (1:55-3:58), the town market (4:02-4:53), and a local pub (4:50-5:24).

As the homescape is more familiar to me, sounds that were otherwise similar to the soundscapes of London and New Cross were imbued with a contextual, psychological significance that could not be detected by unfamiliar listeners. There were subtle differences in such elements of the soundscape (e.g: the volume of traffic, presence of birdsong, etc.) despite the similarity of traffic sounds. I chose to emphasize the contrasts between the 2 soundscapes by placing an auditory emphasis on the people present within the different spaces. In the London and New Cross sections, speech is largely presented as being blurred together in crowds, whereas there is more focus on the specific sonic markers of family voices in the homescape.

The first sound texture featured in *City Living* is that of my father's 3D printer (0:00-0:36). It produces a loud, mechanical noise, with a boxy frequency range due to the device being kept in a wardrobe. The sound source can be easily heard from my bedroom and presented me with an ideal, unique way to introduce the homescape. Percec (2008, p. 6, 15) suggests that space can be configured, transformed and experienced in numerous ways, to even provide reassurance to the occupant. The opening section of *City Living* uses these sound textures to recreate the idealised space of the homescape, providing a nostalgic auditory representation of that environment.

The noise of the 3D printer crossfades into the more musical sound of my brother's electric guitar. These sound files were placed together due to the similarity of their aggressive volume and the fact that my brother's soloing unwittingly mimicked the rhythm of the printer at times. I often jam with my brother and his soloing is an ever-present overtly musical texture in my family home. His guitar can often be heard faintly in the background of meals and various other activities, hence the careful placing and automated fade out of the instrument in this initial section (0:11-1:09).

The transitions throughout the homescape section of the piece are deliberately smooth, with each texture fading out into the next. Similar sound textures are introduced through crossfades that allow the microenvironments to flow into each other with ease, as would be

observed in visual montage. Pritchett (1996, p. 11) goes so far as to argue that intimacy of a sonic nature is more transformative than that of the visual. The sound of close mic'ed cutlery clashing against plates during a family meal is but one example of this intimacy in practice. The sound of the meal fades into the high frequency jangling of fumbling with the front door keys (1:23-1:33) and is eventually cut off by the door closing as I leave the house and move into town towards a school. The sharp accent signals a move from the internal homescape to that of the external homescape environment.

The homescape from 1:33-3:58 is more manufactured in its compositional nature. Prior to this section I aimed to keep the recordings as clean and as unmanipulated as possible in order to create what Truax (2002) might refer to as a "found composition", only adjusting the placement of the sound files and volume automation over time. However, the sounds present outside of the house were more variable in nature and often required the use of EQ, in addition to the muffler used on my Zoom recorder, to ameliorate the low frequency rumblings of wind and traffic noise. Waters (2013, p. 125) suggests that we become aware of how we use and apply our knowledge of an instrument through the process of engaging with an unfamiliar instrument. In the context of constructing my composition, the various noises of the soundscape acted as my instruments. The development of the composition was influenced by both my experiences of the original source material in person, and my re-engagement with that material via the virtual system of playback in Logic. Sounds were abstracted from their environment in this sense. During the compositional process, several family members commented on how surreal it was to hear such familiar sounds being played back on the kitchen table outside of their natural context, for example.

The 1:33-3:58 section of the composition is more artificial in how it conveys the environment of the homescape itself. I recorded myself retracing my educational steps by walking to and from my old high school, and in doing so I inevitably passed several primary schools near my house. I combined these sound files to create an intergenerational picture of the schooling experiences that I grew up with and was surrounded by in my hometown. The sound of a primary school bell ringing to mark the end of breaktime (3:47) signals the end of this section. There is a longer crossfade between the schools and the next microenvironment to mark the difference between the voices involved.

The following sound texture is a lone recording of a market (4:03-4:53), featuring the distinctive voice of a local salesman. The populated atmosphere then transforms into that of a busy pub which my family frequents. The auditory focus subtly shifts to the voices of my family within the throng of background noise (5:00-5:22), thus bringing the initial section to a close with a cyclical focus on family.

The second section of the composition, the transitional section or *musique concrète* of London (5:25-8:16), is designed to overwhelm the listener with warped, alien sounds. Schafer (1977, p. 272) described post-industrial environments, such as the city, as isolating, lo-fi soundscapes due to the high-level noise floor; I aimed to bring out this noise to disorient the listener. My composition heeds Waters' (2013) suggestion of "musicking as resistance" (p. 120); I use the dimensions of musicking via found sounds to highlight my initial psychological resistance to a new environment. Unlike the other sections of *City Living*, little to no EQ was applied. This was because the low frequency rumbling, which could obscure auditory clarity, was beneficial in contributing to the intended effect of acoustic bombardment in the transitional section.

To some extent, the purity of this section in terms of adhering to the traditional Schaefferian framework of *musique concrète* is debateable. Schaeffer's reduced listening

approach aims to remove all familiar associations between the sounds featured in the final composition and their original sound sources through editing techniques such as repetition, truncation, and so on (Chion and Murch, 1994, p. 29). However, the transitional section of *City Living* is initially grounded in the familiar auditory context of a tube station platform.

Trevor Wishart's (1996) writing on the importance of context in building sound objects led me to adopt the approach of grounding audio in a recognisable context, before allowing the sound to develop and transform into unfamiliar textures. However, while this may have the desired effect of disorienting the listener, it might also mean that it is difficult to determine whether the sounds are truly disconnected from the listener's familiarity with the London underground and the recognisably mechanical nature of the noise. As Denis Smalley (CIRMMT, 2014) suggests, the listener's individual psychological experience can influence the connections they make between the sound and the sound environment, leading to source bonding connections that may seem highly unusual to myself (given my familiarity with the environments in the composition), but natural and familiar to the listener in question. Joseph Hyde (2012) suggests that "the listener will tend to imagine a source of origin even if such a source is not apparent" (p. 173), based on his own compositional experiences. The perception of the listener will be influenced by psychological factors such as the sonic expectations that they have developed throughout their lifetime, and that of their present vantage point.

Yet, the transitional section also features manipulated recordings of a Christmas crowd at Hamleys in central London. The Hamleys sound files are only presented within the transitional section of the piece and are near indistinguishable from their original sound files. These could be said to adhere more effectively to the concept of reduced listening, or phenomenological reduction (Kane, 2007).

The transitional section of *City Living* features the most dramatic auditory manipulation. I created the sound textures in this section through using Ambient to process and heavily manipulate my recordings. I altered delay, granulation, reverb and pitch shift settings through the software, and spliced the processed audio files in Logic. These files were then arranged to overlay and fade into one another according to the similarities and differences in musicality of the resulting sound textures. The recordings included in this section were that of a Christmas crowd at Hamleys in central London, and crowded train/tube rides. In some ways, this section of the composition is aesthetically influenced by Schaeffer's study *Etude aux chemins de fer* (1948). Although Schaeffer's recordings were of steam trains, similarities can be observed in the rhythmic chugging of the trains' progression in both *Etude aux chemins de fer* and *City Living*.

In terms of the physical recording process for this section of the piece, I attempted to record material by placing myself and my Zoom recorder in uncomfortable positions (e.g: intentionally joining large crowds or travelling on the tube at rush hour). This presented a few obvious challenges as I would normally avoid such situations, and I found that I was unable to record as many scenarios as I would've liked. However, I was able to maximise the recording opportunities that I had through careful microphone placement. I adopted Hildegard Westerkamp's approach to the microphone as a "moving ear" (Ina GRM, 2016), by choosing to alternate between holding the Zoom recorder at head height to mimic my present listening experience, and holding it at the head height of a child to mimic my uncomfortable childhood memories of London crowds.

At first, I made no distinction between New Cross and London itself but, as the sounds of Goldsmiths and New Cross Road grew more familiar to me, I realised that categorising sound purely by location would not be enough to fully convey the experience of my transition to city

life. Having previously viewed London as a conglomerate mob of sound, my recording experiences allowed me to recognise that there is a significant difference between the sounds of central London and New Cross. The final section of the piece, set in New Cross, is designed to reflect this difference. It aims to present the listener with a sense of lingering disorientation alongside auditory elements of familiarity.

In addition, returning to New Cross after recording at home gave me a heightened awareness of the differences in the two soundscapes. The most obvious difference was that of traffic noise; there were fewer silent gaps in the white noise thrum of New Cross' passing vehicles, and it was more common to hear sirens in the city. Perec (2008, p. 57) discusses the rhythm of passing cars in his summation of town proxemics. I took advantage of the natural textures that such movement within the space provides in order to create the New Cross soundscape and Saffron Walden homescape, but I use panning and sharp cuts to emphasise this difference in my composition.

Although I did manipulate the panning of audio files somewhat, widening the stereo field as some audio files developed in Ambient and briefly placing traffic noise on opposing sides of the stereo field in the final section of the piece (8:30-8:58), I used little panning within the overall mixing of my composition. I used the microphone as a "moving ear" to mimic my own auditory experiences (Ina GRM, 2016). Waters (2013) describes the ear in a similar fashion to Westerkamp, referring to the "microphone standing in as the prosthetic listening ear" (p. 120). When recording my hometown market, for example, I focused on the placement of the microphone and, by extension, myself, to reflect the sounds wrapping around me. This enabled me to capture and represent these soundscapes via the stereo microphone configuration of my Zoom recorder.

The third and final section of the piece (8:15-10:45) is comprised of recordings of New Cross Gate station (8:16-8:31), New Cross Road (8:30-9:00 and 9:54-10:32), Goldsmiths University of London (9:01-9:53), and my shared student flat (10:32-10:45). The transitions between these different environments are deliberately disjointed in order to contrast with the seamless flow of edits between environments exhibited in the opening homescape. Although certain sounds such as traffic may be familiar, the movement between the different auditory environments of New Cross is less so. The brief moments of silence in between sound files indicate a lapse in time and/or location, creating the impression that the listener is jumping from one area to another.

The final section opens with the end of the train journey to New Cross Gate station. It then cuts to the sound of traffic while walking to Goldsmiths, cuts to the experience of Goldsmiths University from inside (a combination of two overlaid sound files: one recorded while standing in between two music practise rooms as I waited for a lecture to begin, and the other of wandering around the cafeteria area in search of an office), cuts to the walk back to my flat, and transitions from the external environment to the internal via the noise of a siren. The siren is initially heard and recorded outside by New Cross Road, but fades into the vantage point of being heard on the flat intercom.

There is relatively little focus on the internal environment of my flat in New Cross compared to the internal environment of my family house in Saffron Walden. This was a deliberate choice made during the mixing process. Although I did record some audio of myself cooking and walking around the flat, I decided against including those files in the final composition as they held little psychological significance to me. Hildegard Westerkamp (Ina GRM, 2016) suggested that recordings with strong associative memories are the most effective

to use in soundscape compositions; therefore, I focused on the sound of the intercom instead, a device which I had never used before moving to London.

The accented sound of the intercom handset being put down provides a firm final note to the composition, potentially taking the listener by surprise. It may not be clear to the listener if the composition will continue after that point, given the abrupt cuts throughout this final section, and this contributes to the atmosphere of slight displacement which characterises the New Cross soundscape. The intercom concludes the final section of the piece.

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