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The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures



Summary

The “Sounding Museum” is an interdisciplinary research project that investigates the application of cultural soundscape composition as a tool in museum education.

At the centre of the Sounding Museum resides the contemporary cultural soundscape composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, which has been produced specifically for this research project. It was designed to supply museum visitors with an instrument to gain an acoustic image of the contemporary cultural and everyday life of the Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, British Columbia, an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, thereby mediating intercultural competence by means of the affective agency of sound. The composition is on display at the custom-built Sound Chamber at the NONAM (Nordamerika Native Museum, Zürich, Switzerland).

The project contains all stages, from the cradle to the grave, of the production and presentation of a cultural soundscape composition, from development, field recording and editing audio material in close cooperation with the research participants and aligned with the insights of modern anthropological and ethnographical concepts, over technical and artistic processing of these materials, to the mediation of the (affective) contents conveyed by the composition, particularly in the museum context, by technical means (Sound Chamber) and museum pedagogic tools, in the form of the workshop “Das Tönende Museum”.

This wide-ranging endeavour calls for a broad, interdisciplinary approach, that utilises knowledge and tools from fields as diverse as acoustic ecology, audio and multimedia engineering, art practice, anthropology, and museum pedagogy. The Sounding Museum’s main task is to investigate the question

“How do I make a *good* cultural soundscape composition for museum-didactic purposes?”

A “good” cultural soundscape composition is to convey essential information about a (foreign) culture via the utilisation of the emotional/atmospheric quality of sound. In order to achieve this, specific criteria have to be met.

- The musical and narrative structure needs to be appealing to the listener, and it should convey core elements of the culture it deals with.
- Transparency within the composition and in its auxiliary materials about which sources have been used, which choices have been made during composition, and, most importantly, by whom, needs to be provided.
- For the assembly and compilation of the audio material a collaborative approach has to be applied.

A cultural soundscape composition needs to be stimulating, it should ignite or tend to the fascination with the foreign, that strange and alien world, that brought the listener to tune in in the first place.

But “Two Weeks” is, next to its qualification as an artistic work, foremost an ethnographic document. The sub-questions that need to be addressed therefore are rooted in problems dealt with in ethnographic methodology and anthropological theory, questions of generalisation, representation, coevalness, and self-reflexivity. The most important assets in this respect are *transparency* and a *collaborative attitude*. In this work the latter is subsumed under the concept of *Session Musician’s Approach*.

That concept *denotes a collaborative framework* (Becker) of *joining others* (Pink). It grounds all methodological and practical decisions in an attitude towards ethnographic research and collaboration with informants that bears strong analogies to the work methods in musical jam sessions. Here, often under the guiding hand of a bandleader, musicians from various backgrounds get together to create a musical performance based on conjointly determined framing conditions and on improvisation. It draws on the *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi) of the participants, which the bandleader/producer/ethnographer must try to synchronise with that of his/her audience. By *dialogical editing* (Feld) chances for a coevally created product and (affective) comprehensibility for the listener are heightened. Working in an ethnographical context, differences in legal and ethic systems must also be taken into account, such as, for example, cultural taboos, or deviating copyright concepts. The ethnographer must remain clear – and offensively address this with his audiences – about his own impact on the final product, and about the decision making process, declaring it not to be a representation of ultimate truth, but of his very own version of it. He must also be aware of the distorting schizophononic effects of the dislocation of sound from its source.

The Session Musician’s Approach rightly applied engenders an atmosphere of respectful and open-minded communication between two cultures, in which the composer’s role is that of a mediator.

The Sounding Museum project consists of the Sound Chamber, the composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, an interactive map, a workshop concept, and, ultimately, this book, which documents and reflects the pedagogic and artistic devices developed in the course of the project. The book, it is therefore important to note, will serve its documentary and reflexive purposes only if regarded in combination with the practical applications of the Sounding Mu-

seum as have been assembled in the boxed set “The Sounding Museum: Box of Treasures”. These are

- the audio CD “Two Weeks in Alert Bay”, second edition;
- the DVD-video (sound only) with the original surround pieces;
- the interactive DVD-ROM “Raven Travelling” containing extensive documentary footage;
- and the book “Four Worlds”.

The book is segmented into Four Worlds, correlating with the four mythological worlds of Kwakwaka'wakw tradition, and a breakpoint between Worlds Two and Three, that build up on each other, each discussing a question that follows from the previous.

- World One: What is a Soundscape (and are there any indicators that imply its active deployment in cultural education may be of use)?
- World Two: How did I create my own cultural soundscape composition, working in the field, dealing with my interlocutors?
- Between the Worlds: What is a “good” cultural soundscape composition, and which methodological framework should be employed to create one?
- World Three: What reflexive potential do I find in anthropological theory, that can help me out of the dilemmas laid open in the work process?
- World Four: How did the implementation in the museum take place?

In *World One* I establish sound as a key phenomenon and tool for cultural studies by introducing acoustic ecology, soundscape studies and aesthetic perception as a trans-disciplinary field of research. From a brief look into sound history and the evolution of recording technology the chapter moves on to its main foci, Murray Schafer and Barry Truax’ conceptual principles of soundscape theory and the ideas of atmospheric perception as proposed by Gernot Böhme, to the latter of which the book returns in the museum part in regard to the reception of removed objects. An excursus into intangible cultural heritage insinuates the link between sound and identity. Herewith the floor is being set for the negotiation of sound and soundscape composition as a medium and tool for trans-cultural communication.

World Two is framed by my field trip to Alert Bay. In a narrative style, paying tribute to the affective approach taken for the composition itself, but also the research project in general, the *genesis* of the soundscape composition “Two Weeks in Alert Bay” is described and replenished with background information on the cultural heritage and history of the Kwakwaka'wakw, the techniques of soundscape composition, and the production of the piece, with a special spotlight on my own doings and dealings with the people and the decisions I took in the composition process. The chapter offers a concrete description of a possible workflow for the creation of a cultural soundscape composition. In its course problems are identified that will have to be addressed in the following chapters.

The *Raven Travelling* DVD-ROM comes in particularly handy at this point. It contains plentiful supplemental material, raw audio, photographs, videos, and other data, that broaden the scope of immediate knowledge about the situational context of the “Two Weeks” field experience. On an interactive map one can navigate to places and events that may help fill the information gaps in the piece and its documentation in World Two.

The breakpoint *Between the Worlds*, that follows World Two, constitutes the watershed between the two larger themes of the book: sound, the soundscape, and soundscape composition as a cultural asset in Worlds One and Two on the one hand, and intercultural competence and education in Worlds Three and Four on the other. It is the methodology section, covering the question how to make a “good” soundscape, and introducing the Session Musician’s Approach and its theoretical and methodological implications. *Between the Worlds* compares the insights gained in the production process of “Two Weeks” with related concepts in scholarly literature with focus on the special requirements of the Sounding Museum and condenses these into the Session Musician’s Approach, which could be applied in further research of a similar kind. It is the transition from making to mediation, from action to reflection.

World Three covers a number of problems that surfaced, but were not systematised, in World Two: research ethics, orientalism, coevalness, and representation. These are rooted in the history of anthropology and its colonial heritage, and deeply intervened with my sound work, in theoretical as well as practical terms. Hence, World Three probes into these, looking at classical concepts by Boas, Lévi-Strauss, and others, and discusses, with Fabian’s claim for coevalness and the here introduced *First Voices perspective*, alternatives to “classical” anthropology with a special focus on a lay audience, the main target group of the Sounding Museum.

World Four, after summarizing some main historical developments and a contemporary definition of the purpose of the museum, as well as reporting a number of examples of sound applications in various institutes, returns to the issue of representation in the light of exhibition design. Its main body, however, is dedicated to the second part of the fieldwork: After completion of the production, the workshop format “Das Tönende Museum” was designed around “Two Weeks” and the Sound Chamber at the NONAM in order to develop a museum-pedagogical tool that makes use of the affective impact of soundscape. The analysis of a series of workshops conducted with school classes show positive results with regard to cliraudience and cultural education. It also becomes obvious that neither the soundscape approach, nor the skilful integration of research, artistic practice, and pedagogic methodology can change people’s perception without a long-term commitment, and also that the institution of the museum itself, as appropriate a place as it may be to get things going, can itself prove restraining.

The book closes with *Next World*, which returns to the research question “How do I make a *good* cultural soundscape composition for museum-didactic purposes?”, concluding that the criteria defined for a successful implementation have been met, and restating the claim that the soundscape approach is a powerful tool to help establish coeval intercultural communication. I remind, however, that especially in the schizophrenic nature of dislocated sound will always lie the risk of distortion, and that orientalism cannot be overcome in a fortnight. Therefore the small-scale success of the Sounding Museum’s framework does not offer an ultimate solution, but rather a set of best practices that, if followed, can improve the performance of research and presentation efforts in the field. Since the responsibility for ethical credibility rests with those who create a cultural presentation, individual integrity will always be of paramount importance.

Next World also discusses different formats and contexts, within which “Two Weeks” was presented, among others a contemporary art exhibition, to probe into a wider range of potential uses and the obstacles they bring along. It offers a peek into potential future developments of the Sounding Museum, aiming, with “The Way of the Mask,” at a more holistic approach less limited to one sensory channel. A proposal for the introduction of an auditory anthropology points back at the tacit, affective, atmospheric basis of cognition, knowledge production, and communication. With the practical experiences from creating “Two Weeks in Alert Bay” and conducting “Das Tönende Museum”, and the theoretical munition provided by soundscape studies and anthropology as employed in this book, a move can be made towards a holistic take on trans-cultural communication, with cultural soundscape composition in the vanguard of the endeavour.

U'melth, the mythological Raven of Kwakwaka'wakw lore, is the Master of Ceremony throughout this book. Every new World therefore opens with a Raven Tale.