

Our Sonic Environment and

THE SOUNDSCAPE

the Tuning of the World

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sonic speeds they arrived in advance of the sounds of their original detonations; but only someone trained in acoustics could have predicted this. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is convincing because the author was there. And we trust him when he describes other unusual sound events—for instance, the sounds made by dead bodies. “The days are hot and the dead lie unburied. We cannot fetch them all in, if we did we should not know what to do with them. The shells will bury them. Many have their bellies swollen up like balloons. They hiss, belch, and make movements. The gases in them make noises.” William Faulkner also knew the noise of corpses, which he described as “little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling.”

In such ways is the authenticity of the earwitness established. It is a special talent of novelists like Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Mann to have captured the soundscapes of their own places and times, and such descriptions constitute the best guide available in the reconstruction of soundscapes past.

Features of the Soundscape What the soundscape analyst must do first is to discover the significant features of the soundscape, those sounds which are important either because of their individuality, their numerousness or their domination. Ultimately some system or systems of generic classification will have to be devised, and this will be a subject for the third part of the book. For the first two parts it will be enough to categorize the main themes of a soundscape by distinguishing between what we call *keynote sounds*, *signals* and *soundmarks*. To these we might add *archetypal* sounds, those mysterious ancient sounds, often possessing felicitous symbolism, which we have inherited from remote antiquity or prehistory.

Keynote is a musical term; it is the note that identifies the key or tonality of a particular composition. It is the anchor or fundamental tone and although the material may modulate around it, often obscuring its importance, it is in reference to this point that everything else takes on its special meaning. Keynote sounds do not have to be listened to consciously; they are overheard but cannot be overlooked, for keynote sounds become listening habits in spite of themselves.

The psychologist of visual perception speaks of “figure” and “ground,” the figure being that which is looked at while the ground exists only to give the figure its outline and mass. But the figure cannot exist without its ground; subtract it and the figure becomes shapeless, nonexistent. Even though keynote sounds may not always be heard consciously, the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behavior and moods. The keynote sounds of a given place are important because they help to outline the character of men living among them.

The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography

and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance; that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment. They may even affect the behavior or life style of a society, though for a discussion of this we will wait until the reader is more acquainted with the matter.

Signals are foreground sounds and they are listened to consciously. In terms of the psychologist, they are figure rather than ground. Any sound can be listened to consciously, and so any sound can become a figure or signal, but for the purposes of our community-oriented study we will confine ourselves to mentioning some of those signals which *must* be listened to because they constitute acoustic warning devices: bells, whistles, horns and sirens. Sound signals may often be organized into quite elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them. Such, for instance, is the case with the *cor de chasse*, or train and ship whistles, as we shall discover.

The term *soundmark* is derived from landmark and refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community. Once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of the community unique. This is a subject to be taken up in Part Four of the book, where the principles of acoustic design will be discussed.

I will try to explain all other soundscape terminology as it is introduced. At the end of the book there is a short glossary of terms which are either neologistic or have been used idiosyncratically, in case doubt exists at any point in the text. I have tried not to use too many complex acoustical terms, though a knowledge of the fundamentals of acoustics and a familiarity with both musical theory and history is presupposed.

Ears and Clairaudience We will not argue for the priority of the ear. In the West the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information about the time of the Renaissance, with the development of the printing press and perspective painting. One of the most evident testaments of this change is the way in which we have come to imagine God. It was not until the Renaissance that God became portraiture. Previously he had been conceived as sound or vibration. In the Zoroastrian religion, the priest Srosh (representing the genius of hearing) stands between man and the pantheon of the gods, listening for the divine messages, which he transmits to humanity. *Samā* is the Sufi word for audition or listening. The followers of Jalal-ud-din Rumi worked themselves into a mystical trance by chanting and whirling in slow gyrations. Their dance is thought by some scholars to have represented the solar system, recalling also the deep-rooted mystical belief in an extraterrestrial music, a Music of the Spheres, which the attuned soul may at times hear. But these