



Retreat of the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology
At *The Haven* on Gabriola Island
British Columbia, Canada
June 12-14, 2009

Random thoughts and impressions by Hildegard Westerkamp
Photos by Noora Vikman





When I approached this rocky beach shortly after my arrival I was greeted by a strident raven call - and another and another. Okay I thought, I am here now, away from the city, on this island where the ravens live. I have indeed arrived. My ears are now connecting with this place and the raven has made sure of it!

In the mythology of the first nations people on the Canadian Northwest Coast the raven is a central figure and is characterized as a powerful trickster and mischief maker. No wonder, for he is everywhere. His call is letting us hear the spaces of this landscape, the inner resonance of indigenous orests (*Urwälder*), the openness of clear cuts, the echoes along ocean cliffs, the darkness of a small lake surrounded by forest, and so on. It is particularly moving when one can listen in on the dialogue of two ravens as they fly through their territory. It is as if their calls give emphasis to the enormousness of this landscape and its huge silence.





But even though we are at a place called *The Haven*, the soundscape is that of an already cultivated landscape, not so far from civilization and the transportation that brought us here, ferries and seaplanes. The silence here is no longer as enormous as it is in more remote places (that do also still exist). It is the silence of an island community

whose inhabitants and holidaymakers are here to be away from the city. Ravens live here as well.

A deep rumble from the ferry pervades *The Haven* space as it passes by at a distance. This new and larger one in particular, a brand new ferry, has extremely powerful low frequencies, which are said to crack foundations of houses in the harbour where it arrives and departs numerous times every day.

The seaplanes taking off and landing in the same harbour frequently pass overhead near the coastline, especially on sunny days. Their motor sounds, even though strident, do not linger as long. They tend to disappear quickly behind the island's coves and cliffs. Heard from a distance their drone-like sounds belong to summer here, outlining the large space of a blue clear sky.



The ocean is very calm and still on this sunny day, but water is suddenly lapping more actively against the shore a few minutes after a ferry has passed. Then it is quiet again. For a moment there seems to be a pause in the soundscape until I hear crunchy, crisp, high frequency sounds. I look up and see two people walking on the rocks

a distance away. The clarity of the sound surprises me. Later during one of our soundwalks I see what causes that quality of sound: the small snails and barnacles stuck to the rocks.



The bark of a dog reverberates in the small near-by cove, where one can see a number of houses behind the trees. Two shore birds are calling while running busily along the sand. A cormorant takes off from the still water, his wings beating strongly as he lifts up into the air. After quite some time an accordion starts playing in the distance, intermittently, hesitant. Suddenly the atmosphere changes. I feel a strange longing, a melancholy from these accordion snippets carried across the water and I think I am in a Fellini movie. Suddenly it is gone again. I wonder about the person who made those sounds. Was he or she aware of the changed mood in the cove's soundscape?

When we talk about this sound later during the retreat, Noora says that the accordion transported her back to Scandinavia. She had just arrived from Finland where she lives and has been involved with the research project *Acoustic Environments in Change*. Indeed she was the first person to present at the retreat: "to put a long story short – an analysis of European village

soundscapes that had also been studied and listened to 25 years earlier by the World Soundscape Project." Years of listening to these villages created an ear for subtleties and deciphering meanings from their soundscapes. For her the accordion was associated with a familiar place and culture.

During one of the soundwalk we came upon a group of trees that invited us into their circle. It felt like an intimate place, their home, or a place that would attract children for play.



Its strangely curved trunks and branches invited us to sit down and listen. And like children we began to play with the materials of this place, bringing the sounds of dry and crisp leaves, sticks and bark close to our ears. Suddenly our ears seemed like microphones enlarging and amplifying the tiny sounds of this landscape.

When Eric Leonardson introduced us to the World Listening Project which he co-founded in 2008, he told us - among many other things which can be found on the WLP website <http://www.worldlisteningproject.org/> - of a live online microphone installed at a window of his own home. During the discussion a retreat participant asked him to let us hear his home soundscape. He connected to the website and suddenly we were listening live to his home environment, his immediate urban neighbourhood in Chicago. A multitude of sensations suddenly occupied the room. Anything could happen there, a sound, an occurrence, while he was here with us. Excitement mixed with alarm, suspense with astonishment, a sense of strange displacement with wonderment at live schizophrenic at its best. An intense discussion ensued that took us into issues of public and private boundaries, into questions of security, voyeuristic behaviour on the internet and the microphone as a tool of surveillance. Listening to his own neighbourhood from this distant location completely altered Eric's perception of this online microphone. I think he turned it off now!



There were other wonderful presentations such as those of Charlie Fox, Eric Powell and Barry Truax, as well as two evening concerts of soundscape work. Every speaker and composer and most importantly, the spirited and interested presence of all participants created this positive, strong retreat weekend.



The programme of the retreat (see details below) was well prepared by Nadene Thériault-Copeland, current president of CASE. Unfortunately she had to cancel her own participation, because of a family emergency. Her husband composer Darren Copeland filled in strongly and sensitively for her, aside from initiating ear cleaning activities throughout the retreat and assisting in all technical matters. Two of the original invited speakers—Helmi Järviluoma from Finland and Keiko Torigoe from Japan—had to cancel as well

for a variety of reasons and were replaced by Noora Vikman and Eric Leonardson respectively. Leah Hokanson, the symposium coordinator and co-founder of the Lulu Performing Arts Society on Gabriola Island, took care that the retreat ran smoothly, that we got our meals and were generally feeling comfortable at *The Haven*, this most beautiful retreat centre right on the water. Hector Centeno, the Technical Co-ordinator and Darren Copeland did their utmost to make sure that all events ran without technical glitches! A big thanks goes to all!