

A Sound Commons for All Living Creatures

by Jeff Todd Titon

Today the air is filled with discussion of commons as a democratic principle of access, sharing and use, particularly the so-called cultural commons¹ and the digital commons. I believe that it is also helpful to think in terms of a sound commons, and that we ought to be managing it instead of damaging it. Why? So that all creatures (ourselves included) may communicate in our acoustic niches in the soundscape. It isn't just because all creatures have the right to life (and they—we—cannot live if we're prevented from communicating in our sound-worlds). I also make a utilitarian argument concerning, as ecologists put it, the beneficial consequences of sound communication to (1) biodiversity in ecosystems, and to (2) ecosystem resilience in the face of disturbance—such as human noise.

In the far northern Canadian wilderness, noise from helicopters flown by mineral explorers and from mining company construction confuses caribou, upsets their communication and has caused them to change their migration routes. Not only does the soundscape pollution impact the caribou, but also human groups such as the Innu whose traditional lifeways (food, clothing, shelter) were fully dependent on caribou hunting—a practice they attempt to continue still, to maintain their culture, even though these former nomads are now settled in villages. And yes, the Innu have songs about caribou hunting. One of them translates roughly as follows: “You [caribou] are so far away, I cannot reach you. I'll catch up with you and call my friends.”²

It's all connected: music to sound, human to animal, culture to nature. Just as sound is enveloped by environment, so is culture, by both the human-built and natural environments.³ When back in the 1950s and 1960s, Moses Asch published sound recordings of New York City sound environments alongside recordings of sounds of sea creatures singing in the ocean, sounds of the office and sounds of steam locomotives, sounds of birds in the forest and frogs in the desert, he must also have understood this. Work in cultural sustainability—which Folkways and the Smithsonian's Center of Folklife and Cultural Heritage always has supported on the grounds of musical and cultural equity—is intimately related to work in environmental sustainability and cannot proceed successfully without it. A sound commons, where all living beings enjoy a commonwealth of sound, embodies the principle of sound equity, encouraging free and open sound communication, and playing its important part in environmental, musical, and cultural sustainability.

Soundscape studies in one form or another have proliferated since the mid-20th century when Moses Asch was most active in publishing Folkways recordings of environmental sounds. Composers, sensitive to whole soundscapes, mixed environmental and electronically-generated sounds into 20th-century *musique concrète* well before the rise of ambient music and

environmental sound art. Many of these composers, such as Hildegard Westerkamp and John Luther Adams, have not only composed music in direct relation to nature but have been very articulate in advocating for a kind of sound activism in response to human degradation of the environment.

Pioneering sound collector Bernie Krause, whose early musical career included a stint with The Weavers, and time spent as a composer/performer of electronic music, has traveled to the remotest parts of the world recording vanishing soundscapes and theorizing about biophony (sounds made by animals), geophony (non-biological sounds made by the earth, wind, thunder, rain, etc.), and anthrophony (sounds made by humans). His revamped website is noteworthy,⁵ while his recent book, *The Great Animal Orchestra*⁶ is required reading for anyone interested in the way human environmental impact has affected animal sound communication and contributed to the extinction of species.

Rachel Carson titled her well-known book about DDT, the flow of chemicals in the environment, and the extinction of animal species *Silent Spring*.⁷ R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer, was concerned to re-orient humans away from a sight-centered universe so as to have them attend to sounds and to managing the soundscape. Pollution, he argued in *The Tuning of the World*⁸ was not only in the air we breathe but also in the sounds we hear. Acoustic ecology, the branch of soundscape studies that followed from Schafer's work, centers on managing noise pollution in the human environment.

However, much more than noise pollution is involved in soundscape ecology. I like to think of soundscape ecology as the study of the flow of sound in the environment. Zoosemiotics, the multidisciplinary science of animal communication, arose in the mid-20th century, with sound as one of the three primary animal communicative pathways (smell and sight are the others). Scientific study of bird song, of course, has been underway ever since the advent of sound recording; the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology encourages study of bird sounds⁹ and one can find amateur nature recordists in the field with their parabolic reflectors to concentrate the sounds into their mics, and also chatting in online listservs.

Long before the rise of soundscape ecology and its many tributaries, Henry David Thoreau was paying careful attention to sound in the environment. Human music, he thought, was but an echo of the music of nature, which was primary. Music, he wrote, was the sound of circulation in nature's veins. Unlike word-bound speech and writing, sounds communicate directly, in a language "without metaphor".¹⁰ He understood and wrote about echolocation (orienting yourself by sound, as Native Americans did in the forests, or as bats do with their sonar); he understood how sound signals presence; he developed a proto-theory of ambient sound; and he paid very close attention to animal communication, writing volumes in his *Journal* about what he heard on his daily walks as the seasons progressed.¹¹

One of Thoreau's most prescient observations concerned what today we call acoustic niche theory: that species not only occupy ecological niches but communicate with one another in their own particular acoustic niches, according to sound frequency (some outside the range of human hearing), time of day, timbre, and so forth—in order to avoid noise interference. Can sounds lie? He also understood how animals could give false or misleading signals (prey to predators).

Thoreau sought sound ecstasies and vibrated with the universe; he built an Aeolian harp and kept it in his partially opened window. Sound was the source of Thoreau's deepest veneration of the natural world and a chief motivator in his desire to preserve and protect it.

The Smithsonian Folkways catalog has since the 1950s included recordings of urban soundscapes, animal communication, and other sound phenomena not normally considered music. Thoreau, who noticed and wrote about the sounds children made when playing games outdoors, would have been interested to hear [*Sounds of Camp: A Documentary Study of a Children's Camp*](#).¹² Fascinated by animal communication, he would have been intrigued by [*Sounds and the Ultra-Sounds of the Bottle-Nose Dolphin*](#).¹³ Understanding the close connection between sound and geographical region, he would have been curious to hear environmental sounds from areas he had never visited, such as the Southwest ([*Sounds of the American Southwest*](#)).¹⁴ And Thoreau, who had once vibrated ecstatically in a vernal pool filled with copulating toads, would have been thrilled by Charles Bogert's scientific recordings of frogs, [*Sounds of North American Frogs*](#).¹⁵

The folk music revival gave us the idea of musical and cultural equity: that all groups of people have the right to express, maintain and develop their musical and cultural traditions. I believe that a related principle, sound equity, should be extended to all creatures. I argue in my blog, *Music and Sustainability*, in favor of a commonwealth of sound, a sound commons for all living beings.¹⁶ A commons, or *res communes*, according to Roman law, was a thing (*res*) that by its nature is incapable of being "captured" and thereby possessed. A commons, then, is not owned by any individual; it is shared. Roman law, which is the basis of Euro-American law, gave as its usual examples of *res communes* the air mantle and the ocean. I submit that the same is true of the soundscape: it belongs to the birds and the crickets as much as to you and me.

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Endnotes:

¹ Lewis Hyde, *Common As Air*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010.

² <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2012/12/the-sound-world-of-innu.html>

³ The emerging humanities field of *ecomusicology* (ecology + music) has risen to address these issues. The field attracts ethnomusicologists, musicologists and others interested in combining the study of music, sound and nature with ecocriticism - itself a branch of the humanities in

which scholars study the relation between literature and the environment in a time of environmental crisis.

⁴ Later, these would become primarily computer-generated sounds.

⁵ <http://www.wildsanctuary.com>

⁶ Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra*. New York: Little, Brown, 2012.

⁷ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1962.

⁸ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.

⁹ <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/birdsongs>

¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Robert Sayre. New York: Library of America, 1985, p. 411.

¹¹ *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. 14 vols. in 2. New York: Dover Publications, 1962, a reprint of the original 1906 edition. A new edition from Princeton University Press has been underway for decades but remains incomplete.

¹² 1959; FWO6105/FX 6105

¹³ 1973; FW06132 / FX 6132

¹⁴ 1954; SF FW06122

¹⁵ 1958 & 1998; SF 45060

¹⁶ <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com>