

R. Murray Schafer: *Winter Diary*

Journal of the Making of a Radio Program

New Music Concerts

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New Music Concerts

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2000 – 2001 season

Friday November 17, 2000

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The flapping got the neighbour's dog barking. Then, more distantly other dogs began to bark. Dogs were the original alarm systems in the countryside, and remain so despite electronic technology. Could be a thief or a wolf out there. The message is telegraphed from farm to farm and behind every dark doorway a farmer cocks his gun.

The dogs grew silent again as we trudged back. Entering the warm house with a fire burning brightly in the grate, I suddenly realized that we had already discovered a valuable *leitmotif* for our program: the contrast between warm, populated rooms and the vast, cold spaces that surround them during the Canadian winter.

There is a painting by Cornelius Krieghoff (1815-1872) entitled "Merry-making" that illustrates this drama between interior and exterior. A party at the Jolifou Inn is breaking up and the revellers are spilling out to depart into the snowy dawn. The drama of the scene is depicted in Breughel style, but the contrast between the hot interior and cold exterior is distinctly Canadian. The same theme recurs in our best novelists, for instance in Frederick Philip Grove's "Over Prairie Trails" (1922) or in Sinclair Ross's "As for Me and My House" (1941), where the counterpoint between society and selfhood is dramatized between being inside and being outside. Marshall McLuhan summed it up

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epigrammatically when he said that Canadians go out to be alone and come in to be with company while Europeans go out to be with company and come home to be alone.

The hinge is the door. One sound characteristic of the Canadian countryside is the slap of a screen door. I've known it since my childhood. Of course it is intended to keep the insects out of the house in summer but due to laziness the screen door is often left on during winter too — as mine is. The door has a coil spring attached to it so that it will slap shut quickly. Usually there is another contraption on the side with a hairpin spring to snap it firm. If it isn't oiled, it squeaks. So the entire sound event is actually quite complex, consisting first of a swish as the door opens, then a swoosh as it closes followed by a residual snap as the second spring is released to hold it shut.

The subject of doors could occupy a doctoral thesis or two. Every continent and climate has its own vocabulary and rhetoric of doors as different as the languages of the people who open and close them.

February 2, 1997, Brandon. The Winnipeg New Music Festival is over and we're off to record the Manitoba winter in a rented car. We arrived here just in time to record an Indian powwow. Distinct gender sounds here: the men drumming and chanting; the women in their embroidered costumes covered with small, funnel-shaped bells that tinkle and clatter as they dance or walk about. We record some of this, then set off for Rapid City to visit the grave of Frederick Philip Grove. A coyote in a field of snow beside the cemetery trots towards us quite unconcerned by our presence. We yodel at him to try to get him to howl, but he just canters around and then trots off.

There is only one restaurant in Rapid City, for despite its name, the place is only a village. The restaurant is full of chatter; elderly people are eating their five o'clock Sunday dinner. The waitress has never heard of Grove, but she calls out the name and a few of the older customers prick up their ears. They had already been following the two strangers with their eyes. I interrogate while Claude discreetly records the conversations, deceiving people with his stereo microphones that look like a Walkman headset. We are pointed in the direction of Grove's old house. Approaching it we knock on the door. "Did Frederick Philip Grove once live here?" "No." A dog begins to bark, and then a polyphony of dogs.

Later, at night, we set out to try to record the legendary sound of the Canadian train whistle on the Prairie. Earlier, in the station in Brandon, the yardmaster had organized what he called "a few licks" for us, explaining how the number of signals had decreased from over 30 to 14 in the current manual, as they have gradually been replaced by radio communication. Every Canadian knows the

three-toned Canadian train whistle — without knowing it. Tuned to an E-flat minor triad with a fundamental at 311 Herz, it's the most authoritative soundmark of the country, curiously analogous to the Yellow Bell or Huang Chung, which established the tuning for all music in the golden days of ancient China. The legend goes that when the tuning of the Yellow Bell was abandoned the empire would fall into ruin. Something like that is happening here, for today more and more train whistles are out of tune, and with the building of overpasses and tunnels urban dwellers rarely or never hear them. Canadian railroads all run east-west. As the authority of the railroad vanishes the east-west axis gives way to a south-north bias and an increase in American sound culture.

We parked on a country road about 17 kilometers north of the Trans-Canada highway. We'd hoped for a really cold night for everyone knows that sound travels best then, but tonight is not so cold, possibly 15 degrees below zero.

Eventually in the far distance we hear the L14 whistle (the signal for a level crossing, long, long, short, long) which incidentally is also the rhythm of the opening phrase of the Canadian national anthem. Claude starts the machine rolling. Five times the whistle vibrates across the Prairie separated by long pauses. One could calculate the speed of the train exactly by measuring the time lapse from one whistle sequence to the next, for the straight roads on the flat Prairie are all a mile apart. After the train passed we could still hear transport trucks whining their way along the highway running parallel to the train tracks.

Altogether it was a good first day of recording. We return to the motel where the heating system is so noisy we can't hear a sound from the highway 15 meters in front of us. Strange paradox.

February 3. A second visit to Rapid City. Parking our car near the schoolhouse where Grove once taught, we plunge our way through deep snow up the hill to read the plaque commemorating his neglected celebrity. Already the snow has changed its sound and texture from the night before. The sun has warmed the top layer enough to form a crust so that one can actually walk on it for short spaces before plunging thigh-deep in the uncrusted snow of shadow areas. A few birds, pigeons, but also chickadees coo and chirp in the gables of the school, now a museum.

10 a.m. We pull into the only gas station. The attendant chats about the latest line of snowmobiles — with heated handlebars! We follow him into the garage where four or five people are watching a "shoot-em-up" video. As we leave, one of the viewers shouts at the screen, "Take that, you bastard!" Outside, the street is deserted. Another transition from interior to exterior.

It is warmer today than yesterday and a heavy fog lies over the snow so that the acoustic horizon actually surpasses the visual. In *Over Prairie Trails*, Grove

talks about getting lost in the fog. Then he had to rely on the instinct of his horses.

I had become all ear. Even though my buggy was silent and though the road was coated with a thin film of soft clay-mud, I could distinctly hear by the muffled thud of the horses' hooves on the ground that they were running over a grade. That confirmed my bearings.... So now I was close to the three-farm cluster. I listened intently again for the horses' thump. Yes, there was that muffled hoof-beat again — I was on the last grade that led to the angling road across the corner of the marsh.¹

Souris. We visited two grain elevators here, one old, one new operated by computer.² Total contrast in the deportment of the workers. In the old building they were talkative. In the new they just stared at the computer screen and answered our questions in monosyllables. We recorded operations in both places. Another interesting difference. Flocks of birds surrounded the old elevator. There were none at the new one. Evidently no grain was spilled there for them to feed on.

What would the Prairies be without wind? It's the keynote sound here, the one against which everything else is registered. But to record it? Impossible. The microphone hasn't yet been invented to effectively record nature's most elementary sounds: wind, rain, fire... No money to be made on them, though this shows signs of changing today.

The problem in recording the environment is in trying to pull a huge spread of events, far and near in all directions, into a single focus. The soundscape isn't stereophonic, it's spherical, an experience, where one is always at the centre.

Down a country road, we tried to record the wind in the hydro wires, or rather the vibration transmitted to the pole. By pressing the microphone right against the pole we got an incredibly rich spectrum of sound, surging and waning as the wires vibrated.

Next we visited a farm but recording here proved disappointing: cows munching hay, a snowmobile ride around the field. Talking to Alan, my cousin, was more interesting. He told me that he could tell the voice of each cow and calf and knew whether the animal was contented or ill from the sound alone. He could also tell every farmer coming up the road by the sound of his tractor.³

February 4, Sioux Valley, where we met Mike Hotain, a very special Dakota Indian, who had visited my class a few years ago at Brandon University. For him every sound has a spiritual significance: a burst of rain, a whirlwind of dust even a loose board in a squeaky gate. They are the spirits of ancestors talking to

us. The more unusual the sound, the more significant or personal the message. I've tried before to get him to be more specific about what kinds of sound denote what kinds of messages, but without much success. Leaves spinning in a circle is his grandmother talking, and he always stops to listen to her, because she was a wise woman.

It would be interesting to know whether these spiritual denominations of sounds are shared traditions or idiosyncratic to each individual. In any case it must contribute to patient listening, and when we went to the far end of the reserve, where Mike said there were three eagles, he was very quiet while Claude let the Dat machine run for half an hour; but all we got was a short yelp from a distant coyote, almost too faint to register.

Mike is also a song writer and credits the environment with inspiring his songs. A broken differential on his car was the origin of one song. A puppy jumping up on his hind feet inspired another. We recorded him singing some short examples. He actually sells his songs to people who commission them for a special occasion, a birthday or a wedding. Then it becomes their song, i.e., their property, in the same way that we might acquire a painting.

February 5. The weather continues mild, matting the soundscape. Even the snow sounds mushy. People who live by the sea know how the colour of the water changes constantly, but one has to live with a long winter to know the perpetual changes in the sound (as well as the colour) of snow. Even the lapse of an hour can alter it profoundly, and the experienced listener can pinpoint the temperature by the sound of his footsteps in it. On the cold nights it screeches. Sometimes a crust will build up to produce a crunchy quality. Or even several crusts, separated by layers of powdery snow, giving variations of dissonance with each step.

We are building up a repertoire of footsteps, coming and going down the quiet roads.

Cars, moving down the road from and to the acoustic horizon are another typical Manitoba sound that might interest European audiophiles. Assuming cars to be universal, we forget that the sound changes in different environments. On a country highway we recorded the approach and departure of individual cars and trucks, sometimes lasting three minutes without any other sound intruding. Where else on earth could you do that? Not even here except on a still winter day.

Back in Souris, we recorded wood being split; cedar logs, well frosted, with a good splitting axe. Mike Hotain said that the sound of splitting wood, heard in the distance, on a cold day, was one of his favourite winter sounds. Mine too. It prophesies the fire.

February 6. This morning we went on a dog sled ride. The yapping, whining, howling and squealing of forty or more husky dogs in their compound is an incredible acoustic experience. Watching a dozen of them being harnessed to the sled gave us a chance to see them close up: blue eyes, or almost as frequently, one blue eye and one brown eye. We climbed into the sled, both tape recorders running, and were off with a sudden yelp, both from Claude and the dogs, but they soon fell silent as the sled rattled across the snow. The dogs began yelping again as soon as the ride was over. One dog whined a solo aria with the vociferous affection of an Italian tenor and we got that on tape.

Erickson. A small town settled originally by Norwegians, with a lousy restaurant and a full size concrete replica of Leif Ericsson's Viking ship on the main street.⁴ Here we recorded the only church bell we've come across so far. The church has no belfry and the bell sits on a wooden rock about two meters high with a rope dangling down. Coming from Québec, where every village has a church and every church a steeple, usually with three or more bells ringing out the hours, Claude finds all this very strange. But it was the train whistle, accurate to the minute in the great days of the railroad, that was the timepiece of the Prairies, not church bells.

Excursion into Riding Mountain National Park. Total isolation. We realized that the only way we could give an impression of the soundscape here was by making sounds ourselves, so we set up the microphone in the snow and walked away from it, shouting in different directions. Although we were surrounded by forest our voices sounded very dry, and this puzzled me. I had expected some resonance from the trees.

We came back after dinner and performed the same manoeuvres in the dark. The darkness brought a little more resonance than the daylight although the wolves or coyotes we were hoping to arouse failed to answer our shouts. We made a small fire and warmed ourselves a little with some crackling fir branches.

I came out alone in the car after Claude had gone to sleep. Never had I heard the world so silent. Is it near or far, this black landscape? My own slightest movement makes it seem near. The frosted crack of a distant tree makes it vast. My breathing brings it close again. Justin Winkler pointed out that the soundscape is essentially a static term, but here it seems dynamic, increasing to an infinite volume, then shrinking right inside me as my stomach gurgles. I turn the ignition key and am startled and relieved at the same time. I escape back to the motel with its noisy propane heater.

February 7. Strange phenomenon this morning on waking. In my dream I had been singing a solo song at some kind of gathering. I finished and everyone applauded enthusiastically. Instantly I awoke to hear the propane heater come

on. So the conclusion of my song and heater were synchronized? But I had sung a rather lengthy song to its conclusion before the applause of the heater. I even remembered the song and sang it over again to myself while lying in bed. Had I anticipated the end of it and paced the singing to a sound that I could somehow forehear? Or had the whole event occurred in the fraction of a second as the heater came on?⁵

The whole issue of whether we can forehear events is an interesting, though largely undeveloped topic. If we can foresee events and order our lives to avoid them or bring them about, why shouldn't we be able to forehear them? Sensing the future with the imagination is an acknowledged process in metaphysics but so far as I know, at least in Western philosophy, these projections have always been visual. But what is the avant-garde composer doing if he isn't forehearing the sounds of the future?

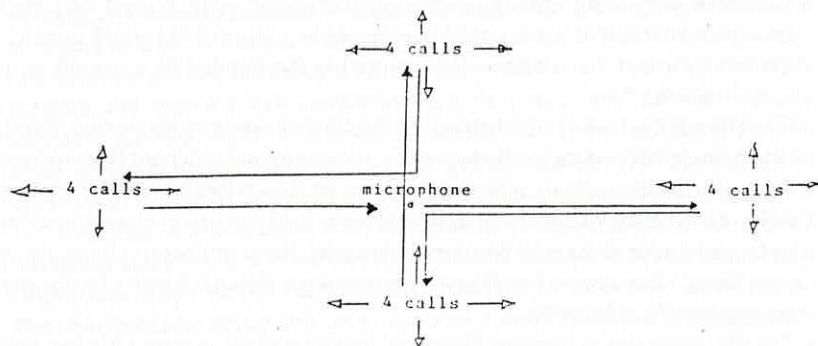
We drove up to Dauphin. The travel brochure says: "Listen! It's the quiet. Broken only by the howl of our neighbour, the wolf. Sneak up and enjoy our seasonal wildlife...from the silent curiosity of the white-tailed deer to the roar of a charging snowmobile; we have it all!"

Our first visit was to a large old church, recently converted into an art centre. We asked the woman in charge whether she could think of any distinctive sounds in Dauphin. She couldn't. "What about trains?" The Churchill train comes through at 3 a.m." "Any others?" "The noon train comes through about five minutes after the siren." "A noon siren? Where's that?" "Right here on top of the building." No distinctive sounds in Dauphin!

We recorded the siren from close and far simultaneously, then shortly after, the train. Claude said he had never been so close to a passing train before; it was a long freight train and we got every percussing boxcar of it.

Returning to Riding Mountain National Park we pulled off the road and stepped out to listen. The sun was setting. It was totally quiet. Eventually the whisper of a jet aircraft became audible. It crossed the sky distantly, its passage lasting several minutes without any other sound interrupting it. A perfect sound event in an anesthetized environment. Another theme for our program.

We returned to Lake Catherine and repeated our trek around the microphone, calling in different directions. This was beginning to become a ritual drama and I suggested we try to develop it by creating deliberate patterns of walking and calling. So we walked out about twenty feet in each of four directions stopping at each point to call four times, once facing each direction before returning along the same path. Like this:



Will this come out on tape? Strange how isolated people develop little rituals to avoid surrendering to the entropy (chaos) of winter.

Ice: Spotting some children knocking down some icicles in Sainte Rose du Lac, we rushed over to record them but frightened them away.. So we knocked the icicles down ourselves and then kicked them along the street. Each chunk had a different pitch and when they broke into pieces the pitch rose. I was glad to have this other form of frozen water to add to our repertoire.

Gladstone. We recorded another church bell on a similar rack as the one in Erickson. The squeaking of the bell on the hinges was almost as strong as the bell itself.

Minnedosa. Another town with a siren, this one sounding at 8 in the morning, noon, and six at night — “tells you when to go to work, to eat and to go to bed.” was the way a resident explained it.

In every soundscape the sounds you miss are just as important the ones you hear — or the ones you hear and miss.

Claude was bringing things from the car to the motel when he heard a wolf howl. He rushed for the tape recorder. By the time he set it up the howling had trailed off. It was not repeated. He came in cold and dejected, then went to his room and exhausted himself with the marasmus of television.

February 8. A day of recording at the Festival du Voyageur in St. Boniface. We had had high hopes. The activities, intended to illustrate the culture of the French traders and travellers in Manitoba, were authentic enough but the music orchestrating them was absurd: for instance, Black rap music powerfully delivered behind an announcer calling out a dog sled race.

One sound intrigued me, though we were unable to record it. The doors of the cabins situated within the old fort were drawn closed by means of a rope connected to a stone weight encased in a wooden shaft. As the door closed, the stone scraped softly down the shaft producing, what I suppose was a sound as common to the seventeenth century habitation as the screen door later became to the farmhouse

Claude confesses his excitement for recording. He is almost like a fighter pilot seeking out the enemy, the elusive sound object, slating his various dives at the material we've targeted for a take, hoping the desired event will occur on cue, wondering whether to stalk it silently or prompt it — or forget it and seek another campaign. “So many things can go wrong,” he says excitedly. Ruefully I agree.

We listened to today's takes after dinner. Perhaps it's the small monitors, but I'm dissatisfied. The difficulty in obtaining clean takes is almost insurmountable, now that we've returned to the city. There is just too much cross-talk; cars almost everywhere. Could we imagine microphone with a discrimination circuit to allow us to record sounds the way our ears hear them, or is this merely another form of pathetic fallacy only the romantic recordist could hope for? The value of the microphone is that it presents simply what is there. The tape recorder puts a frame around it, often astonishing us with sound events our real ears have missed.

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February 19. In this era of machine wizardry, it's quite possible that the biological ear will die. This thought occurs to me on the train travelling to Montreal where we will edit the Winter Diary program. Half the heads we see in cities today are soothed by some kind of electronic receptor or transmitter: headphones, hearing aids, cellular phones, or other schizophonic devices devoted to cyberspace modulation.

There must be at least half a dozen cellular phones around me right now. People speak loudly on them, trying to sound important. The cellular phone is a wardrobe item just like the ghetto blaster was a “third world briefcase”, but it's an advertisement for the “first” world, or at least those citizens who would like to convince us that life is a perpetual business emergency. Still, I notice that more calls go out than are received and conclude that, like the ghetto blaster, cellular phones are fashion gadgets for the “identity challenged”.

February 20. Montreal. Today we prepared a catalogue of all the eligible sounds we recorded and loaded them into the computer in preparation for mixing. Having

listened to them on a good pair of speakers, I'm now trying to determine the major themes of the program and the structure uniting them.

One of the themes is interior — exterior, contrasting society with isolation, as explained earlier. Related to this is the theme of warmth versus cold. So the program should have a thermic quality; we need to feel the transition from the warm interior to the vast, cold expanses of the Prairie. The transitions between these extremes must be deliberate; so entries and exits from buildings will be critical.

Another theme will be rituals. Several social activities with strong ritual structure are included in our collection: hockey games (both in arenas and on outdoor ponds), church services (we have two from different denominations), the Indian powwow recorded in Brandon, and the Festival du Voyageur in St. Boniface.

A third theme is temporal: the articulation of the long winter with its cold days and nights into recurrent sound events by which its passage can be measured. Train whistles are primary here for they occur at predictable intervals, recognized by everyone, even in remote places many miles from the railroads. Already I have decided to use five of these, occurring precisely at ten-minute intervals over the 60-minute duration of the program. The first whistle, very distant (recorded 17 kilometers from the source), will occur ten minutes into the program. The closest will occur thirty minutes into the program, to be followed by the last two, receding into the distance again. The rest of the material will be arranged in the intervals between these recurrent sound events.

To emphasize the isolation of the Prairies there will be lots of silent moments, softly punctuated by distant barking dogs, chirping birds, the wind, single cars passing down long straight roads, as well as by our footsteps in the snow, and our ritual calls. I've decided there will be three sets of calls; one at the beginning of the program, one in the middle and one near the end.

I'm undecided whether we'll use the quest for Frederick Philip Grove. We've got a nice little sequence, beginning when I read the inscription at his monument, continuing with the visit to the restaurant to find out where he lived, and ending with the unsuccessful visit to his former home, where the inhabitant (a boy) didn't know he had lived there; but this may involve too much language for a German audience. The appeal however, would be that Grove was actually born in Germany and had established himself as a writer there, under his original name, Felix Paul Greve, before emigrating to Canada. He was evidently quite a sophisticated young man, having mixed with figures like Stefan George and André Gide. To think of him spending his mature life as a school teacher in a Manitoba village is so bizarre that perhaps it needs a treatment of its own.

All this, and much else, is undecided at this point. We'll just have to wait until the program is finished to find out exactly what gets included and what gets left out. The themes are clear and I want to present them as clearly as possible, using the sounds themselves, with an absolute minimum of mixing and manipulation.

Notes

- 1 Frederick Philip Grove, *Over Prairie Trails*, Toronto, 1991, p. 47.
- 2 Prairie farmers truck their grain to elevators where it is stored and then moved out by train. Every small town on the Prairies will have one or two grain elevators.
- 3 Recognition of this sort is not limited to humans. Dogs will recognize the footsteps of their masters. And cows have been credited with recognizing the sound of the veterinary surgeon's car. See Maru Pöyskö, "The Blessed Noise and Little Moo — aspects of soundscape in cowsheds," in *Soundscapes*, ed. Helmi Järviluoma, Tampere, Finland, 1994, p.82.
- 4 It is now assumed that Leif Ericsson was the first European to reach North America, sometime during the tenth century.
- 5 I have had other dreams over the years that have presented similar temporal puzzles: in one I heard a crash then opened my eyes to witness a real picture fall off the wall and crash to the floor. J.W. Dunne's mentions similar durational dislocations in *An Experiment With Time* London, 1958, p.59, and presents a scheme for explaining them.