**In Situ Improvised Soundscape Mixing**

**Jon Aveyard**

**JAveyard@uclan.ac.uk**

“A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment.” (Westerkamp, 2001) The content of some soundwalks can be described with reference to guidance provided by a leader, a set of instructions or an audio track. However, even in the absence of such guidance, there are other variables from which more detailed descriptions of a soundwalk can be made. For example:

* The soundwalk may be for an individual (solo) or it may be shared alongside other people;
* It may take place at a site known or unknown to the listener;
* It may take place whilst in one spot, whilst travelling along a route, or whilst meandering within a space;
* It may follow a planned route or an indeterminate route;
* It may allow for the participant to manipulate the surrounding environment to generate additional sounds or it may be conducted silently;
* It may be recorded or unrecorded.

This document describes a particular practice of recorded, solo soundwalks, conducted silently, following indeterminate routes within known spaces. In this practice, the soundwalk is conceived as a binaurally recorded improvisational performance in which choices about route and timing are informed by real-time decision-making and intuition rather than pre-determined planning. The use of locations with available sound separation options is a key characteristic of this practice.

Following the performance, one or more extracts of the recording are selected to create either a single or multiple pieces of music or multiple movements within the same piece. The selections receive no further editing: no multi-tracking is used; no processing is applied other than possibly normalization, fade-in at the start and fade-out at the end; and no cuts are made, even short ones, so any other unwanted sound heard at the performance stage means sounds which came before in the performance cannot be the same movement or piece of music as sounds which come after.

The resulting tracks are intended to be listened to as composed pieces of music that focus on gesture and textures whilst also incorporating an awareness of the origins of the sounds.

This document is not a description of how recorded, improvised soundwalks must take place; it is a description of one particular approach to recorded, improvised soundwalks. The document will detail this practice and refer to two example pieces of music, these being ‘Preston train station’(2006) and ‘Norwich market’ (2019), both available on the album *Shops, Trains and Leaves* (Aveyard, 2020).

The method described below was developed during the composition of ‘Preston train station’ then tested in 2019 whilst searching for other appropriate locations at which to apply the same process. Three further locations in Preston being rejected, a short visit to Norwich led to Norwich market being selected as the second location in which to fully apply the In Situ Improvised Soundscape mixing process.

**1. Choosing a location**

Locations are selected for this practice according to the following criteria:

* the ease with which it is possible to move inconspicuously through the space,
* the level of musical potential in the sounds, their relationships, and their positioning within the space,
* the extent to which the layout provides opportunity to decide how sound separation is used thus allowing for increased control over soundscape changes.

The desire for sound separation control means locations for this practice are likely to be human-made. This brings with it the desire to avoid the pollution (for the purposes of this project) of radio play or music playback.

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| Three Preston locations that have been scouted but found unsuitable for this practice include the outdoor market which was found to be lacking opportunity for sound separation and had large areas polluted with radio play; St. George’s shopping centre which had much to offer in terms of available sounds and sound separation but was thoroughly polluted with radio play; and the bus station which was a good candidate but lacked diversity of sounds and sound separation choices compared to the two locations that were used.  Preston train station allows plenty of ease of movement except at times when ticket checks are in operation. The function of the location means that little attention is paid to the performer walking at different speeds or changing direction. The location offers a wide variety of sounds with clear relationships between them. The open plan of this particular station means that it is possible to select proximity to the trains, sometimes more than one at once, as they arrive and depart. Walls allow for control of the main soundscape, and areas such as the waiting room, shops and subway allow the performer to easily step into completely different soundscapes.  Norwich market also allows almost complete ease of movement though the function of the location means that changing speeds and direction is more conspicuous than at the train station and so risks causing discomfort to and suspicion amongst other users of the space. The variety of stalls at Norwich market means that a diversity of sounds is on offer. The layout is the most valuable characteristic of this location - the grid formation of the constructed stalls, reaching above head-height, means that sounds can be raised and lowered in prominence through approaching and leaving them behind, but can also be almost entirely removed through a 90 degree change in direction down another lane of the marketplace. |

**2. Preparing for performance**

Once a location has been selected, further scouting can take place to best prepare for the performance itself. This enables the performer to become more fully aware of the affordances and limitations of the space ahead of full engagement with the performance(s). This stage can be considered akin to an organist or drummer, for example, acquiring familiarity with a new instrument ahead of a performance.

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| The train station was already a known soundwalk location of mine. Preparation involved developing an awareness of which paths would more likely result in unwanted lulls in the music, and in learning how the arriving, stationary and departing trains sounded from around the station. It also meant gathering a list of arrival and departure times for each performance so that these might be taken into account when making decisions within the performance.  For the market, less well known, this meant identifying which stalls were most likely to offer sounds worth recording, which areas of the market were to be considered off-limits for the recording due to the unwanted sound of radio play, and from which areas of the market the clock chimes could best be heard. |

**3. Performing**

For the performance itself, the performer walks through the location choosing how and when to change pace and direction. Although the performer is silent, the walk is a musical improvisation: the performer is making decisions in response to sounds heard and anticipated, and is using the previously gathered knowledge of the location including predictable sound events to influence those decisions.

In this practice, the aim is to experience and capture a spatial point-of-audition (a term taken from Chion’s *Audio-vision* (1990)). This means that the performer is to be silent during the performance and, although travelling through the space, is to avoid capturing on the recordings rapid movements of the head that would clearly denote the performer’s presence.

This practice uses the recordist as a mobile point-of-audition within the soundscape but, unlike an artist such as Dallas Simpson or in other examples of my own soundscape composition (e.g. the ‘Nottingham Soundscapes’ pieces also on the *Shops, Trains and Leaves* album, Aveyard 2020), not as a participant engaging with the soundscape and later to be encountered by the listener through either the sounds or movements made.

The performance is expected to make use of the capacity of the environment for sound separation in order that there might be stretches of music heard from a static point-of-audition, stretches heard with gradual distance changes applied, and moments where the soundscape is transformed to something very much different through the use of available sound separation. (This too contrasts with the work of Dallas Simpson whose practice this most resembles but who favours gradual proximal change as heard in his music (Simpson, 2020) and as articulated through his conversations with Robindra Raj Parmar (2019).)

During the performance, there is an awareness of possible start and end points for the subsequent audio selection and this also influences the ongoing decisions being made about the route. The self-imposed rule of not allowing even short cuts at the editing stage dictates that an unwanted sound (e.g. swearing by a passer-by, a personal conversation by passers-by, a cough from the performer) or a period that is too uneventful to be included in its entirety tells the performer that the sounds that follow cannot be in the same piece of music as the sounds that came before.

At such times when there is this knowledge of a break in the music, the performer may want to revisit places previously visited to better ensure they find their way into the final selection, and may want to be thinking about at what moment the next suitable start point for a piece of music might be.

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| Several visits were made to the train station and many hours of recordings were gathered. The goal was to find a single piece of music from this location so a number of promising paths were identified though these were never fixed in use. In contrast, there was only one brief window of opportunity to perform the market so an hour’s material was collected within a much more intuitive and responsive improvisation. |

**4. Editing**

The edit involves taking the performance recording and choosing a start and an end point to generate a single piece of music, or a series of start and end points to generate multiple pieces and/or multiple movements. No multi-tracking, cutting or processing (beyond possible normalization, fade in at the start and fade out at the end) takes place within the selected extracts of audio.

At the performance stage, it may be clear which extract will be selected for dissemination though there might still be something to be gained by auditioning more of the recording to check for other unexpectedly strong potential extracts or for unexpected problems with the favoured extract of the performance.

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| A single selection as made from the many hours of Preston train station recordings. Six short movements were selected from the Norwich market recording. These can be heard on the album *Shops, Trains and Leaves* (2020). |

**References**

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