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Quieting the Iron Beast: The Train Whistle as Alarm

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Trained Alarms: A Salute to the Iron Beast (2:20)

Statement about Sound Work

Sound shapes and is shaped by the spiritual and cultural aspects of a community, and the train has emerged as a critical soundmark within the larger soundscape of industrialization. The train has also been contextualized as a romantic icon of days gone by. The train is symbolic not only of what we hear, but of what has been silenced by it in the name of progress. This essay is accompanied by a sound piece that allows the listener to hear Western and Eastern train signals converge into one soundscape. Two trains run concurrently, representing past and future, and arrive simultaneously at a train station. The final destination is Walden. The listener follows as one train completes its maiden voyage, whereas the iron beast has made its final shout. The chirping of the Kiha E2000 along the Koumi Line in central Japan is the soundmark of this new hybrid train that debuted in Summer 2007. Its sound offers stark contrast to the thunderous drum roll of the American train, a rustic sounder from once expanding territories. The idea for this sound work is grounded in the writings of Thoreau (1854), Russolo (1919), Cage (1961), Schafer (1977), McLuhan (1994), Thompson (2002), and modern Japanese sound theorists Takeda (1971) and Torigoe (1994). The composition includes excerpts from the Shawnee National Forest in the U.S.A., sound from Niigata and Tokyo in Japan, and draws inspiration from recordings taken from the area around Walden's Pond in Concord, Massachusetts.

An Introduction to Sonic Warning

Canadian Sound Artist R. Murray Schafer's 1977 *Tuning of the World* is a pivotal book that launched the field of acoustic ecology. Schafer calls attention to the historical and cultural significance of sound, presenting a strong case for aurality as a cultural phenomenon. Bells, foghorns, clock towers and other icons provide sound marks that assign places certain cultural meanings. As sounds meld together in a town, a keynote is composed that becomes unique to a place or time. It serves as the sound setting that we unconsciously hear in our daily lives. Signals that interrupt our soundscapes demand attention: ambulance and police sirens, tornado warnings, door bells, and so on. Schafer's lead on the *Vancouver Soundscape* project in the 1970s was an attempt to not only preserve sound, but to underscore noise encroachment onto our pristine natural spaces.

Schafer points out that certain noises have quenched the richness of our natural soundscapes. The noise accompanying modernity is perhaps best symbolized by the locomotive, a mechanical wonder that shouts of adventure and domination simultaneously. Emily Thompson (2002) speaks of the impact of industrialization on our daily soundscapes, music making and listening. What once disturbed and shocked our auditory senses would readily become cultural vibrations that inspired new ways of listening and composing. Murray Schafer (1977), John Cage (1961; 2005), and other sound theorists cite Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's classic *Walden* (1854) as critical reading for any meaningful debate on the relevance of sound in our lives. In the mid 1800s, Thoreau wrote the two chapters entitled 'Sound' and 'Solitude'. His writings were inspired by his setting – the revelatory surroundings of his sonic refuge. It was the sound of nature that blanketed him on chilly nights in his small cabin. From this space, he hears birds,

squirrels, wind, rain, and, yes, the train. Albeit uninvited, it arrives into his soundscape on time, cutting through his range of hearing and making itself known over other sounds that reside within Walden.

The Iron Beast as Revelation and Warning

Thoreau's *Walden* serves as a spiritual awakening, one that is announced through sound and appreciated through silence, allowing for greater introspection within the self (Lambdin 1969; Sherman 1950). The arrival of the industrial age is aurally represented through the sound of Thoreau's locomotives. The roar of the machine becomes contextualized within natural spaces, and emerges as one composition. At times Thoreau hears the train whistle as a pleasant bird call, and at others he describes it as a 'devilish' crude iron beast on the path of destruction: the whistle signals change, which both enriches and threatens Thoreau's soundscape. The whistle becomes as beguiling to the hearer as the mythical siren. The train with its whistle and thunderous applause issues warning of an impending transformation to society as well as to the environment.

In this essay, we explore how the train emerges as a soundmark within the larger soundscape of industrialization. Train sounds also have been romanticized as icons of days gone by. The whistle remains, for the most part, as the sonic connection to the recent past and future. Technological innovation is not without its price. The train is symbolic not only of what we hear, but of what has been silenced in the name of progress. Thoreau is seen as a significant contributor to sound culture by Japanese sound theorists, and as such his writings become relevant to the aural contextualization of the train. The final section of this essay considers the soundmark of Japan's new Kiha E2000 and its implications for a quieter soundscape (and world).

Rehearing Culture

Silence, according to Schafer (1977), should be heard as emptiness or void. Sound, in contrast, causes interruption in a space, by its very physics, a propelling of molecules and vibrations. Keiko Torigoe (1994) gives us a definition of sound culture that includes the concept of conscious sound-making or listening; it considers our perception of what we cannot or actually do not hear: 'Sounds of the past, sounds of the future, sounds in our memories and dreams – all these kinds of sounds should be included' (Torigoe 1994, p. 6). Japan, unlike America, has historically attempted to preserve the sound integrity of certain natural spaces, partly due to the significance of sound to its culture. Yet Japan does have its share of noise, especially in crowded train stations. Aboard the train, however, passengers are respectful of one another's sonic space. This is a sound culture of extremes: one in which the pitter-patter of text-messaging is greeted with grimaces by one's fellow passengers; and yet, in another context, one that has given the world karaoke. What becomes obvious is that sound is a point of negotiation among the Japanese people, in everything from play to work to home. How a particular noise or sound might impact its soundscapes becomes a cultural issue that cannot be ignored.

True, one can become desensitized to certain interruptions in soundscapes, as people become accustomed to daily sounds (such as traffic or birds). Shin-ichiro Iwamiya (1998) conducted a survey among

foreigners living in Fukoka that revolved around a variety of sound questions, which included: (1) What sounds do you hear only in Japan? (2) Which sounds do you hear less often in Japan? And (3) What is your overall impression of the Japanese acoustic environment? Responses to question 1 included 'the traffic sound signal for the blind', 'the exhaust noise by wild bike riders', 'the peddlers' cries', 'chirping of cicadas' (primarily American or European), and 'sounds of Japanese-style pinball game parlours'. Responses to question 2 were 'bird cries', 'car horn', 'native language', 'chimes of the church bells', folk songs and instruments from their home country, children's voices, and barking dogs (Iwamiya 1998, p. 1). As for question 3, American and European respondents noted a noisy Japanese soundscape, whereas Asian participants in contrast heard a 'silent' acoustic environment (Iwamiya 1998, p. 1). Observations, evidently, were contextualized within memories of conversations and experiences.

Rehearing Walden

Thoreau perceived nature as a meditative space for mind and matter to converge through thought and sense, and this exchange of dialogue is captured within *Walden* (Robinson 2004). Nature is interpreted to the reader through Thoreau's writings, and serves as a context to his observations. Nature is expressed through his elaborate descriptions, and Thoreau is the resident translator. Transcendentalism, as actualized by Thoreau, tempers the philosophical excesses of Lockean empiricism ('sensualism') and Kantian idealism ('extreme subjectivity') (Robinson 2004, p. 13).

Walden Woods, presently a 2,680-acre ecosystem, remains a shrine to such contemplation. It is a place where Thoreau acknowledged that the mysteries of life were greater than what the elite minds of New England and Europe had to offer him in ways of philosophy and spirituality. The most grandiose thoughts appear to be superficial and fleeting musings when compared to the very *inventions* of creation. Thoreau's metaphorical journey to Asia and Africa asks the reader to consider the significance of these continents as representative of one's need to explore untapped sources within our mind and environment and to think beyond Westernized views of spirituality.

Through his chapters 'Sound' and 'Solitude', Thoreau wrestles with the tangibility and intangibility of sound. Birds, trees, and trains compete for his attention. Silence is not even a consideration for Thoreau, since the modernity with its associated noises has already encroached upon Walden by this time. Thoreau is fascinated by the richness and layering of sounds that compose this natural mix. The train has moved from signal to keynote in his soundscape. In other words, he occasionally gives the train whistle equal, if not more, of his listening attention and interpretation than the resident screeching hawk.

Rehearing Japan

Walden is perceived as a modern-day *Hojoki*:

It is true that Thoreau retired to a hut built by himself near Walden Pond but, unlike [twelfth-century Japanese writer Kamo-no-] Chomei, he did not intend to retire from

the world; rather, he sought a new way to live in the real world (Takeda 1971, p. 171)

Chomei, centuries earlier, wrote in *Visions of a Torn World* on his attempt to live a spiritual and simple life, not bound by time. He constructed a ten-foot hut that would allow him to seek solitude within Buddhism much like Thoreau's cabin would become a refuge for New England Transcendentalism centuries later.

Thoreau's 'high esteem for the spiritual life' introduced a glimpse 'beyond American materialism' to the Japanese public (Takeda 1971, p. 172). Additionally Thoreau's work might be heard as a bridge to the writings and thoughts of Japanese poet and philosopher Miyazawa Kenji. Born in Iwate in 1896, Kenji followed in the tradition of Chomei and Thoreau, and chose to live a simple existence, which was seen as a rejection of his family's wealth and Buddhist faith. Like Thoreau, he retreated from modernity to open a dialogue between nature and humanity. Thoreau did not reject spirituality; rather, he expanded the concept of American religion beyond church hymnals to one that explored sound as an extension of self.

Thoreau's literary and ecological work has found prominence within Japanese sound culture. In 'Thoreau in Japan' (1971), Katsuhiko Takeda presents a comprehensive overview of Thoreau's philosophical, political, and ecological influence on Japan. Thoreau's writings would become one of the early exports of American culture, along with Western Christianity. By the 1880s excerpts from *Walden* ('The Bean Field', 'Berries', and 'The Pond') had arrived sporadically in the literary circles of Tokyo. Over the course of the next century, Thoreau would be viewed as a philosopher of nature, religion, and the simple life. The train roared in and out of Thoreau's sanctuary, and he could only retreat from industrialization – he could not escape its influence on his soundscape.

Rehearing the Total Scenery

John Corbett (1995) asserts that sound and its counterpoint, noise, can be heard as a remnant of both rationality and emotionality in the wake of post-colonialism. Its relevance as a cultural signal draws from imagination as well as evidence. Tadahiko Imada (1994) explores Japanese sound culture from a variety of perspectives, stating that 'there are as many ways of listening as there are cultures and ears' (Imada 1994, p. 5). He illustrates that the lotus flower emits a sound during its bloom that is below the frequency range of human hearing, yet people gather to listen to it in the early summer – and perhaps even imagine that they have heard it: '[i]t seems the ancient Japanese people considered various sounds as the total "scenery"' (Imada 1994, p. 5).

Consider other examples of hearing between the lines, as when Torigoe (1994) participated as an overseer of a silent places contest in Tokyo (sponsored by The Nerima Ward Division of Environmental Management and the Soundscape Institute of Tokyo). Listeners were asked to name their favourite places of silence, and to describe the place. Torigoe points out that silence should be not construed as the absence of sound at a given place. Silence resides within 'the twittering of birds, the voices of insects, and the rustling of leaves' (Torigoe 1994, p. 6). Think of it as a space within space (Breinig & Lösck 2002; Johnson

2006a). One contestant noted that her silent place – a grove of ginkgo trees – was inspired by a second world war story she had heard as a child:

a young man used to practice the trumpet at dusk on this ground. [...] Now every time I pass by this place I feel as if I were hearing a sad tune which I have never actually heard. (Torigoe 1994, p. 6)

Resetting the Alarm

Schafer (2005) calls attention to the difficulty of separating sound from social meaning and physical surroundings. The push for modernity in the early twentieth century was mistakenly conceived as a path toward 'transcending nature' (Thomas 2001, p. 22). Some, like Edgard Varèse and Luigi Russolo, envisioned nature and human-made sound as evolving into one composition. Varèse made his plea for organized sound in the midst of modernity, where one might invite, not exclude, sonic variations within one's environment. David Dunn and Francisco Lopez do not see the need to separate human 'intrusion' from that of nature (Lopez 2005, p. 87): '[o]ur bodies and imaginations engage in sonic transportation and reproduction more than the machines that we have intended for these purposes'. Lopez continues,

[a]nd not only do different people listen differently, but the very temporality of our presence in a place is a form of editing [...] Our idea of the sonic reality, even our fantasy about it, is the sonic reality each one of us possesses. (Lopez 2005, p. 85)

Concluding, he adds, '[w]hat I'm defending is the transcendental dimension of the sound matter itself' (Lopez 2005, pp. 85–86).

Johnson (2006b) conducted a sound study of American and Japanese students (attending a U.S. Midwestern college), who participated in a summer trip to rural and urban parts of Japan. From this study, it was evident that train sounds - inside and out – became significant and obvious to these travelers due to an absence of noise, rather than an awareness of sound. One of the Japanese women remarked, '[i]t is interesting we can hear silence in Japan – like in the train, people are so silent. We can hear someone using their cell phone: hah-pah-papa'. One Japanese respondent observed, '[t]he train on the track has a really big sound in America; in Japan, it doesn't have much noise'.

Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1994) can perhaps help us to deconstruct these cultural differences and uses in sound. He positions technology as an extension of self, and therefore we might assume that the signals we attach to certain devices are as meaningful as their practicality to particular space, time, or culture. McLuhan helps us to further contextualize aurality as a tangible force with critical implications for society:

The sudden visibility of sound just as sound ends is an apt instance of that great pattern of being that reveals new and opposite forms just as the earlier forms reach their peak performance. (McLuhan 1994, p. 12)

As the whistle's meaning becomes assimilated into our culture, the train signal may no longer alarm or inform us – but romance us. It also can be viewed as archaic and counter to the natural soundscape. The Japanese debut of a quieter, more environmentally designed locomotive in mid-2007 showcased a sound that blended with its nation's natural soundscapes. Japan has progressively worked on improving its train sound. The twenty-first-century train is one that glides across the rails with barely a breath or shuffle, and its warning signal resembles a car door alarm at times. At other moments, the chirping is reminiscent of a nagging alarm on a digital clock. The implications for not hearing a stealth train, of course, might become a cause for alarm in and of itself.

Is there a point where technology and nature might become one, if there were no place for the human to retreat into solitude? Few soundscapes can escape jets crossing through them. Technology is assigned a social voice. Noises with certain regularity become institutionalized within our soundscapes. The alarm, as a signal and/or soundmark, informs our schedule until we no longer notice it – and that too has implications. New alarms come along to replace the former ones, but not without new consequences of their own.

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