

Pisaro, p.1

Ten framing considerations of the field

(working notes for making field recordings)

Michael Pisaro, October/November, 2010

My task here is to simply catalog some of the considerations that go into making a field recording. It is a way of outlining the number of aesthetic decisions that get made, even before one starts to make use of the recordings in more integrated or elaborate ways. It is meant to be practical and (hopefully) useful. (I may have neglected considerations – and welcome suggestions for additions.) Although I do think an untreated field recording can be an artwork, this is not really that argument.

A recording is a reduction. The immersive sensual experience of an environment will in the end be represented purely in terms of sound. It is possible that a sound recording device will in some cases hear more than we do, but it will obviously never capture everything that is sounding. It will be limited in time and in the perceptible borders of the soundscape. I will call the various operators of this reduction “the frame.”¹

1) How long is the recording?

Where it comes to *scale* (unlike in photography or film) there are very few limits here. Although we might say there is a potential standard length range (between song and symphony – let’s say 3 minutes to 30 minutes), this is conditioned by traditional notions of what a piece is. Shall we make some 1 second field recordings? 5 hours? 24 days?

2) When is the recording made?

Midnight in a church in Berlin (as Peter Ablinger has done)? Sunrise at river’s edge (as the birds awaken)? The 5 Freeway in Santa Clarita on a Sunday night (shockingly active)? It is obvious that *when* is just as decisive as *where*. I wonder if any of us knows the sonic difference between the environment of our local mountain in July and August? (We can make recordings to find out.)

3) Where?

Where?

1 One legacy of Cage’s *4’33”* was to sharpen the concept of the composition as a musical frame. In this work the fundamental act of the composition is to indicate a series of durations and the actions of the performer to indicate their beginning and end.

Pisaro, p.2

4) Proximity

How close is the microphone to what is recorded? Is it inside the hive or at the hive's edge? This allows us to say what else can come inside the frame. Perhaps the grass is blowing outside the hive. I think we can assume that, without using a contact microphone, true isolation is not frequently encountered in outdoor environments. It is more a question of *how many* layers of sound will be present, than whether there will *be* layers.

Proximity is another kind of scale consideration – one that interlocks with duration. A large-scale painting can be made of a small section of nature (Georgia O'Keefe); a small size painting can be made of a huge swath of landscape (Albrecht Altdorfer).

5) Degree of focus

Perhaps the most overrated decision made by the field recordist is the equipment used (this is, for my taste, definitely the most tedious *discussion* in the field recording world). I believe that *any method* of recording can yield interesting results. The method acts as a limit on what can be recorded: Zoom recorders might be put inside a refrigeration unit without much damage, but I'm not about to stick a Sennheiser stereo pair in one.

For me the question of sound quality is a question of focus: How much detail will be present? There are obviously situations where a "soft-focus" is more beautiful (or revealing) than the micro-detail available with expensive set-ups (and, it goes, without saying, *vice versa*).

Let us not make financial considerations into aesthetic determinants.

6) Moving or stationary?

Most of the field recordings used in music today are the equivalent of still-camera recordings. This is sensible: it is much easier, and one is less likely to encounter unwanted artifacts. It allows, especially in longer recordings, for depth-of-field and a real sense of the evolving soundscape. But the moving microphone also has much to recommend it: It can show in real time the effects created by differences of the frame. It can provide a consciousness of the borders of any soundscape as we transition from one to another. It also has the effect of making clear the essential relativity of any (field) recording.

The last four on this list might be viewed as questions that are more about what can be done after the recording is made. But they are nonetheless aspects of the frame, and potentially also useful to keep in mind even when recording.

Pisaro, p.3

7) Fading (or cutting)

There are so many elements in a sound landscape that the question of when (and how) to introduce them is important. The fade of the recording is in counterpoint with all the fades (and hard cuts) that occur in the environment itself. The fade is the realm of the *passepartout* – the frame on the edge of the frame. (Derrida explored the aesthetics of this in the visual arts at great length *The Truth in Painting* – I think there are many useful observations in that book that apply indirectly to the aesthetics of field recording.)

8) Editing

To me the most interesting aspect of field recording is its potential to put us into contact with the “real”: with the infinite multiple of sounds in any situation. We are at best only dimly aware of this fact. The recording medium is stupid: it simply picks up everything that falls into its frequency range, without discerning or sifting. Our ears, being connected to very smart brains, are extremely good at selective hearing (as any parent knows).

A field recording can give us access (through the displacement of a mechanical copy). Whenever I make one, I’m excited for the moment of playback, away from the site. The question is always the same: What didn’t I hear? And, by extension: If I cut something out, do I run the risk of not really hearing a crucial fact of the environment? Is there an ethics of this situation? It may depend on whether one arrives with a preconceived notion of what should be recorded, or whether a part of the process is to learn what sounds.

9) Filtering

This issue is related to the one above. Of course filtering can be used to re-balance to a certain extent, deficiencies in the microphone frequency response (although it is very hard to do this in a realistic way – but this is also related to point 5 above).

Most importantly, however, it can draw our attention to aspects of the sounding situation we might otherwise have missed, especially fleeting and quiet phenomenon (like the sweeps of harmonic series partials against a canyon wall).

10) Assembling

Is there one recording or several (or many)? Do we play them back one at a time or layered on top of each other? Which will give the best impression of the environment I want to represent? (That is, in a particular instance, is the abstraction made with a single recording as true as the abstraction created by several?)

Pisaro, p.4

In his *The Sound of Light in Trees*, David Dunn miraculously condenses the cycles of activity and the shades of difference of Engraver Beetles inside piñon trees, gathered in two years of field recording, into a composition of 59 minutes.²

²! The booklet for this disc discusses the implications and aesthetics of this kind of decision beautifully (2006, EarthEar 0513).