

Tracing Walfridus – A Quest for the Sound of a Past Landscape

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ABSTRACT: This paper tells of my artistic search for the sound of a landscape that no longer exists in the Netherlands. It brought me to the pristine raised bogs of Estonia, where I made binaural field recordings. That material has been used to make a series of new sound pieces. But more important, the undertaking revealed empirical insight in what it means to be somewhere and how space can become a place: not the spatial dimensions, but temporal aspects are paramount.

KEYWORDS: field recording, landscape, history, music, folklore.

1. Introduction

As a former physicist I used to keep the distance between nature, the object of research, and myself, the investigating subject, as large as possible for the sake of objectivity. This practice felt to me, however, as if something was kept out of the equation. Nowadays, as an artist, I have much more freedom to account for my own position with respect to my surroundings and to nature. It has, in fact, become the main motif in my artistic practice: what does it mean to be somewhere, what is the meaning of place, how does space become place? Recent events in the area where I am living, (Groningen, NL), have made these questions all the more urgent to me. Centuries of cultivation and exploitation – in former days as peat excavation, today as natural gas extraction – has led to regular earthquakes in that region. A safe and solid place should never be taken for granted.

Above-mentioned questions and events led to a closer examination of my own environment. Since my visual perception might be too rationalized due to a scientific training, I chose to observe my surroundings mainly by ear. In the course of one year, I made stereo field recordings on several occasions during each season in the area between Groningen, Bedum and Ten Boer (Figure 1). From that material I made a sound piece in four parts entitled *I-II-III-IV* (2014/2015). Composition of the piece was loosely borrowed from the most famous piece in Western art music that imitates sounds of nature: *Le quattro stagioni*.¹ The resulting sound piece gives a sonic impression of a typically Dutch contemporary cultural landscape.

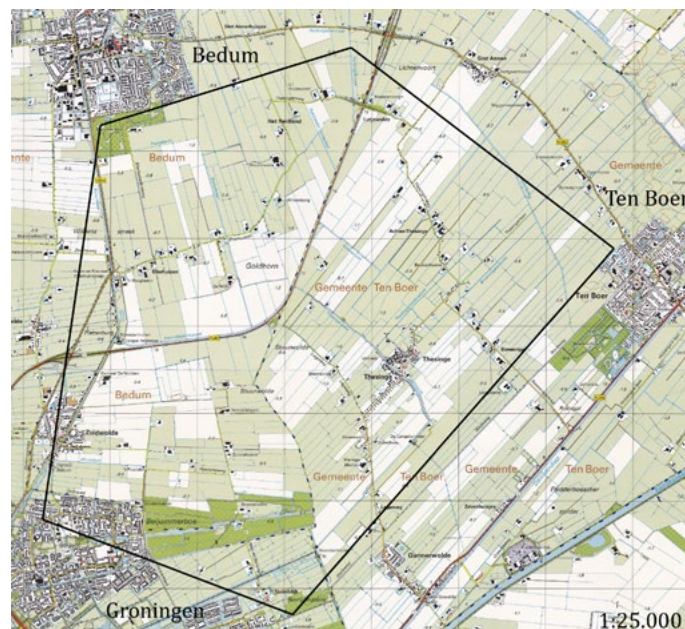


Figure 1. Topographical map of the region between Groningen, Bedum and Ten Boer (Kadaster, 2013). The figure roughly indicates the area where field recordings were made.

1. Nr. 1–4 of Opus 8, *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione*, by Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), published in 1725 in Amsterdam by the music publishing house of Estienne Roger and Michel-Charles Le Cène (Rasch 2012).

While making field recordings between meadows, in wheat fields and near gas extraction installations, I wondered when people started to cultivate that landscape for the first time. So I delved into history via several routes. From historical geography I learned that once a thick layer of raised bogs covered the area where I made my recordings. These bogs had formed since the beginning of the Holocene, almost 12.000 years ago. In early days, rivers that intersected the bogs were used for transport; first proof of permanent inhabitation has been found in monastic records, indicating that from around 950 AD onwards people had resided on the bogs (Ligtendag 1995). From local folklore I learned about Walfridus of Bedum, a pious figure who probably lived around 1000 AD and is according to legend the first person to have cultivated the raised bogs in my region (van Schaik 1985).

After finishing *I-II-III-IV* and the additional historical research, the wish for a better understanding of the place I live remained. Moreover, the historical information that I gathered, had given rise to a further question: how would the bog landscape have sounded when first people started its cultivation? This question gave rise to a new project as counterpart of the one that had resulted into *I-II-III-IV*. The goal of this new project is to (re)construct the sound of a past landscape by following in the footsteps of the first man that allegedly entered the raised bogs in my region roughly 1000 years ago; or in other words, by tracing Walfridus of Bedum.

2. Method

Time travel is not possible yet. So, the only way to collect the sound of a past landscape is by travelling to another place where a similar landscape still exists. In my search for such a place I use the following requirements for an acceptable degree of resemblance:

- presence of pristine raised bogs;
- presence of certain natural features such as rivers and a nearby sea;
- bog area at least of same size as the area of recording in Groningen;
- similar climate zone;
- similar latitude;
- unknown territory to me.

The first two requirements simply describe the landscape in Groningen at the time Walfridus was living. Since the aim is to construct a counterpart of the contemporary piece *I-II-III-IV*, I demand the bog size to be comparable with the area where I made the contemporary recordings. Similar climate zone and latitude allow for similar weather and seasonal conditions. The last requirement gives me the opportunity to imitate Walfridus' first time entry into an unknown landscape.

The project plan is to visit that place of resemblance each season and to collect its sounds, this time by making not only stereo but also binaural field recordings. Binaural recordings emphasize my own presence in the landscape. That quality corresponds well

to a project that is all about first presence of people in an uncultivated landscape. In addition, optimal playback of binaural recordings is through headphones, which gives rise to a cocoon-like listening experience that strongly enhances the feeling of being at another point in space and time.

Next to the field recordings, I also plan to take pictures and collect other sensory information. Finally, the wish for a historical understanding of my own region forces me to travel to another place. Of course, that other place has a history of its own. To obtain a broader picture of that other place, I intend to do some research on its history as well.

3. Results

3.1. Similitude

A place that serves as a contemporary version of the landscape in medieval Groningen is Soomaa, a national park in the southwestern part of Estonia (Figure 2). Soomaa consists of five intact raised bogs that are separated by a few small rivers. The largest bog, Kuresoo, is by itself bigger than the area of recording in Groningen (11.000 ha versus 10.000 ha). Soomaa is located close to the Pärnu Bay, part of the Gulf of Riga and thus the Baltic Sea. According to the Köppen-Geiger climate classification Estonia lies in the zone of humid continental climates that have cool summers and mild winters due to maritime influence (type Dfb). This is not exactly the same as the (current) oceanic climate in the Netherlands (type Cfb), but sufficiently similar for my purpose. Last but not least, I have been neither in Soomaa, nor in Estonia, I don't speak Estonian and I know little about the north-eastern corner of Europe, so it is definitely unknown territory to me.



Figure 2. Map of Soomaa National Park (from www.loodusegakoos.ee). The figure indicates the size of the area where field recordings were made in Groningen (cf. Figure 1).

While preparing for my first visit to Soomaa, I came across several scientific publications about Nigula, another intact raised bog area located a little south from Soomaa. Since this bog seems to be so well documented, I decided to make field recordings there as well during all my visits.

I visited Soomaa and Nigula in 2016 during the following periods: in winter from January 29 till February 10; in spring from May 18 till May 29 and from June 1 till June 6; in summer from August 11 till August 28; in autumn from November 1 till November 15. The type of landscape I encountered during these visits varied more than I had expected. At first glance each raised bog is just as any other, a thick layer of moss with a few little pines and an occasional bog pool. At closer look however, each of the Soomaa bogs has its own particular appearance, determined by the amount of trees and the presence of large clusters of either bog pools or bog islands.² Furthermore, the various raised bogs are separated by forests, flood plains and rivers. All these different vegetation and habitat types are essential elements that constitute a typical bog landscape.

3.2. Sounds

During the visits I made both stereo and binaural field recordings at many locations at Soomaa (Figure 3) and Nigula. Each season I returned to these same locations as much as possible. Soomaa is famous for its regular floodings, the so-called fifth season. I happened to enjoy such a fifth season twice, once in winter and once in summer. On those occasions roads were flooded and subsequently closed, so some parts of the area were not accessible at that time. The best way of accessing the area during a flood is by canoe. But the canoe trips brought me to places I could not reach by foot at times without floods. Hence, I could not always visit all of my recording locations at every season.

2. A bog island is an area within a bog that is a bit drier than its environment so that trees can grow and reach normal height, and where other plant species such as heather or Labrador tea can survive the otherwise wet conditions of the bog.

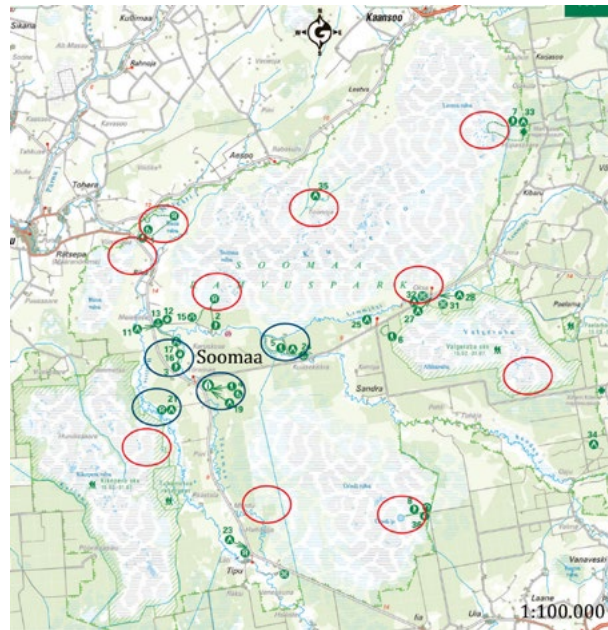


Figure 3. Again the map of Soomaa National Park. The red ellipses indicate recording locations on raised bogs; the blue ellipses indicate the locations in forests and flood plains.

The recording locations covered not only the raised bogs but also the forests, the grasslands and river shores, in order to gain an accurate impression of a bog landscape. Recording time differed from location to location, from visit to visit, depending on weather conditions or disturbances. Recorded sounds are mostly keynote sounds (Murray Schafer 1994) of geophonic and biophonic origin (Krause 2015). However isolated Soomaa may be, sounds produced by human activity are never far off (e.g. traffic, forestry, airplanes). Because of the historical focus of the project, I avoided these contemporary, anthropophonic sounds as much as possible in my recordings.

3.3. Songs

Background research on Estonian history revealed that folk music and especially singing has been of utmost importance for Estonians throughout their history. It was a Singing Revolution, a series of singing events and demonstrations between 1988 and 1991, which led to the restoration of the independence of Estonia after decades of Soviet occupation.³ In less recent history, folk music and singing played a major role in maintaining the Estonian language and creating an Estonian identity in times of domination and repression by foreign powers (Hasselblatt 2012). The oldest folk songs are the runo songs ('regilaul').⁴ It is believed that these songs were already sung millenia ago, so also around the same time Walfridus was

3. Interesting to note: first protests arose from within the environmental movement. So, protection of the landscape acted as lever to free its inhabitants from occupation. Apparently, fate of a landscape seems to be more intertwined with that of its inhabitants than is generally acknowledged.

4. See also: <https://www.folklore.ee/pubte/eraamat/rahvamuusika/en/index> (accessed May 20, 2017).

living in Groningen. Because I was curious whether traces of those bygone times are still lingering in these songs, I focused more on these songs in my investigations.

Runo songs have rather simple, repetitive melodies. Texts consist of eight syllable lines and are often characterized by the use of parallelism. Runo songs were sung at special occasions as well as during daily chores (Kurrik 2013). In the last century modern end-rhyme songs have almost completely replaced the runo songs, but recently the tradition revived: singers study old, archived recordings to perform the songs again, and musicians reinterpret or refer to the songs in their work (Koch 2012). A well-known Estonian composer whose work is largely based on runo songs is Veljo Tormis (1930–2017).⁵

3.4. Series

After my last visit in November 2016, I had a huge amount of sounds, pictures and research material. My only strategy that I could think of to process that data was to go through it step by step. Up to now, this approach has resulted in three series of works.



Figure 4. *Tracing Walfridus #00*, photo series, variable size, 2016.

5. A few examples from his enormous discography are *Litany to Thunder* (ECM Records, 1999) and *Eesti Ballaadid* (Forte, 2010).

The first series starts with a visual representation of the actual tracing activity and is entitled *Tracing Walfridus #00* (Figure 4). *Tracing Walfridus #01* (Figure 5) is a sound piece that represents the action of walking through a landscape, referring to the geological timescale from the last Ice Age until the Anthropocene; it includes a song that tells the story of Walfridus in the style of a runo song. *Tracing Walfridus #02* (Figure 6) is a next sound piece that guides a listener through the seasons in a bog landscape. More pieces will follow; the final goal is to develop a counterpart of the sound piece *I-II-III-IV* that I made of contemporary Groningen sounds.

Another series that I started is *Bog Book*, a series of textile books that look like scale models of a bog during the different seasons. Leafing through such a book resembles the excavation of a landscape. A third series is entitled *Suur tamm* ('Great Oak'), a photo series that focuses on the linear and cyclic time evolution in a landscape.



Figure 5. Exhibition overview of *Tracing Walfridus #01*, binaural sound piece, 3 min 17 sec (loop), 2016. The exhibition took place in Veendam (NL), a place with a long history of peat excavations.

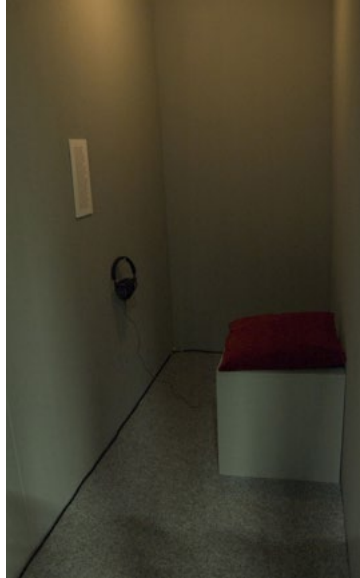


Figure 6. Listening booth at an exhibition of *Tracing Walfridus #02*, binaural sound piece, 7min 30 sec (loop), 2017. The story of Walfridus is presented as text on the wall.

4. Conclusions

My project is about the (re)construction of the sound of a past landscape. The intention and approach has been purely artistic. My main ambition underlying the sound pieces is to raise awareness and recognition of our acoustic environment and of the volatility of sound, or more implicitly, of time. It might be interesting though, to empirically compare the two places I have been listening to so intensively for a longer period of time.

4.1. Two places

Compared to the comfort of a cultural landscape, my impression of a raised bog is that of a hostile, uninviting and impenetrable environment. I am in great awe of the first people who started to cultivate such land. Despite the difficulties, lots of the European raised bogs have been cultivated or excavated though. Even in Estonia, raised bogs are protected in a national park. A small fraction of those bogs have been made accessible to the greater public by means of boardwalks. Only a few locals really know their way through the bogs.

A rough acoustic comparison between the cultural landscape of Groningen and the pristine raised bogs of Soomaa reveals some interesting differences as well as similarities. First of all, since a raised bog is in general a relative silent environment, sounds from far away are less obscured. This influences the perceived spatiality: a bog seems to be much bigger and wider than a cultivated, inhabited landscape of same size.

Spring is the noisiest season and winter is the most silent season in both landscape types. However, the difference in loudness between spring and winter is bigger in a bog landscape than in a cultural landscape.

The man-made cultural landscape of Groningen is inhabited, so its tempi tend to evolve more on a recognizable, human scale, whereas tempi in a raised bog predominantly evolve on a non-human scale (e.g. grow rate of the bog is only a few mm per year; insect cycles take place on a seasonal timescale). Hence, rhythm of cultural landscape sounds is generally faster and more repetitive than that of a raised bog. However, considering a bog landscape as a whole, including forests and flood plains, rhythms in both landscape types tend to be more similar, mainly because of the presence of birds and (bigger) animals.

With regard to the type of sounds: sounds in a bog landscape are more often water-related than those in a cultivated landscape with water management. Likewise, a lot of bird and animal species are more common in Soomaa than in Groningen, and so are their sounds. Surprisingly though, few of these species can still be heard in Groningen despite the absence of extensive forests, let alone raised bogs.⁶

4.2. Time

As stated in the introduction, the fundamental questions in my artistic practice are: what does it mean to be somewhere, what is the meaning of place, how does space become place? Although I am still processing the material of the present project, there is one aspect that is becoming ever more clear to me: the notion that being somewhere is primarily time-related.

First of all, time comes in different measures. The volatile moment is perfect for sharing experiences; in contrast, monumental history — a composition of many moments — passes down experiences beyond generations. Being somewhere is both volatile and monumental.

Not only time, but also the time scales that are present in a landscape appear in different measures. A pristine raised bog can be over 10.000 years old, an oak tree a few centuries; other organisms live several years or only a few months. If at a certain place a wide range of time scales is present, it can invoke feelings of futility or resignation. This might contribute to a sense of really being at that place.

Another aspect to be considered is the direction of time evolution. Some natural phenomena are characterized by a cyclic evolution, determined by the day-night cycle or the alternation of the seasons. Other phenomena show a more linear evolution in time. For example, peat moss grows at the top and dies at the bottom. This strongly linear growth is actually the reason why wetlands can develop into raised bogs. In my view, being somewhere requires a certain balance between the various types of time evolution. In Western life, emphasis is on the linear variant (i.e. on growth, on progress), while the cyclic variant is ignored.⁷ This might contribute to the erratic feeling of haste in modern life and the inability to really be somewhere.

6. This observation actually shows the adaptive quality of nature that I find a hopeful prospect.

7. As a matter of fact, since the linear growth of peat moss eventually leads to an oligotrophic, impoverished environment, such growth model might not be the best route to a blossoming future. In whatever field, sphere or realm.

Last but not least, I noticed that the more I visited Soomaa, the more the separate memories of previous visits blurred and started to cluster to just one instance. That composed memory also seemed to persist better than the memory I had after only one single visit. Obviously, multiple visits mean more time spent in Soomaa. But in my view, it is not so much the accumulated duration of the visits, but the repetition that transformed the specific moments into a persisting continuum. Perhaps this transformation is how space becomes a familiar place.

The ongoing construction of a continuous memory from repetitive, singular occurrences is, in fact, the basis of any folkloristic tradition. Questions about sense of place are therefore intrinsically related to folklore. So in hindsight, it is not a surprise that at some point during my quest runo songs sought my attention. The repetitive melodies resonated with some of the moments that constitute the continuum of memory in my mind. And since these individual moments themselves have been lost, the songs evoked my imagination instead. Probably this interplay is what happens during listening to sounds in general; it becomes an act of not only the perception of the sound but also an effort to restore lost memories by imagination. That would mean that the sound of a past landscape that I am trying to (re)construct, is already contained in each and every head. It is just a matter of kindling the imagination.

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