

The Practice of Listening in Unsettled Times

HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP

westerka@sfu.ca

Composer, radio artist and sound ecologist

ABSTRACT: The seemingly simple act of listening to the environment often leads to unexpected complexities of thoughts, sensations and emotions that are not quantifiable or measurable. When we listen for example on a soundwalk, we simultaneously take in the current conditions of the acoustic environment and those of our innermost sound world, our thoughts and emotions. The nature of this fluidity between our inner and outer sound worlds is both highly personal and at the same time universal. It is here where the real journey of listening starts.

Once we learn that listening in itself is a grounded and grounding place, which nevertheless is always in motion, we recognize its inspirational nature. Its inherent motion forms the real base for grappling with the deeply personal in ecology and culture, for moving beyond self-absorption and navel gazing, and finally facing, accepting and integrating the complexities of listening as a type of depth approach towards caring ecologically for the health of our soundscapes and the beings within it.

The complexities of ‘just listening’ will be traced throughout this presentation by dipping into examples of soundwalk experiences, as well as into a personal case study of sorts that I have conducted throughout much of my adult life, as a way to reach that which we share universally between us.

Thank you Raquel Castro for inviting me to this conference in this rather special location. Often there are other powers at play when we hear something, when we then make subsequent decisions and act on what we heard. You could not have known what other powers lead me to stand here today. But by the end of this talk you will. I invite you all – while listening to this talk – to trace your own journey to these islands and your motivations to be here, aside from being attracted to this intense and wonderful event

In the world of listening and acoustic ecology, context is everything. Understanding as much of the context as possible alters our listening and our comprehension of what we hear. It also makes abundantly clear that we cannot be aware of everything at all times. But let's at least be conscious that each one of us, who presents work at this conference, does so from a unique perspective that evolved from unique contexts, whether we choose to address this directly or not.

For today's talk I have chosen to address some of these more personal contexts that have informed my work, my listening and composing, and my choices. Once we take listening seriously in the context of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies, we know, that the personal is always implicated. Our responses to sounds and soundscapes are never objective, can never be converted into scientific data without the loss of the subtle nuances that make each person's listening impressions unique.

Listening is never static and implies constant shifting and perceptual movement. Michael Stocker describes this beautifully when he says that “our experience with sound unfolds as a *continuous now*,” (my italics).¹ Not only does our perception move its attention through the multitude of sounds that it encounters in the environment, but it also shifts from those to our inner sound world and thoughts and back again to the outside. This seemingly random movement back and forth occurs in highly individualistic ways for each one of us. If we become conscious of this, we can witness and perhaps learn to notice when, how much and for what reason our listening attention is captured by our thoughts on the one hand or by the outside world on the other. I am interested precisely in this transition from one to the other, that rather hard to grasp, ephemeral in-between moment of perception. It is there where I suspect we can find clues about the relationship between our personal innermost world and the larger issues we are facing regarding acoustic ecology and balance in the acoustic environment.

This movement between inner and outer sound worlds in our listening practice is symbolic in my mind for a similarly fluid movement between our personal and professional lives. Much as we may try to separate them, at a certain point in our lives and usually when the extraordinary occurs – such as births, deaths, falling in love, accidents, political upheavals,

1. Stocker, Michael. *Hear Where We Are, Sound, Ecology, and Sense of Place*. Springer, New York Heidelberg Dordrecht London. p. xiii

and so on – it is more obvious that the personal and professional flow together and influence each other.

In many of our minds and in many professional contexts the personal has been relegated into a place of lesser value, as if it somehow smudges the work with dirt, destroys its purity. It is precisely for this reason that I want to highlight today how certain experiences in my personal life have always informed and influenced my professional activities and creative work and vice versa. I am approaching it as a type of personal case study that may resonate with the universal and archetypal in all of us.

Sound Example: 1. Familie mit Pfiff_Theme.wav

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/1-familie-mit-pfiff-theme>

You just heard a door being unlocked, someone whistling, and a piece of music that you may have recognized as an excerpt from a Schubert Symphony. I heard a whistle tune that my father used to whistle every time he came home. Or whenever I heard someone whistle this tune in other places, I knew some family member was calling out to me, was saying hello. These were joyful and connecting moments. One could perhaps say that the whistle tune was our soundmark that signified a sense of belonging within the Westerkamp clan.

I learnt early on that this tune was also the beginning of the third movement of Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 9 in C major, known as The Great.² In 1976 I decided to bring the whistle and the Schubert theme together in a composition created for the occasion of a family reunion. Its title *Familie mit Pfiff* was chosen because of its inherent pun in the German language: literally translated it means "family with a whistle tune", but figuratively it means "family with zest".

In the years leading up to the reunion I had worked with the World Soundscape Project and discovered a deep enthusiasm and passion for the world of listening. All this led me to think of my wider family and the reunion from a fresh perspective. I realized that the whistle tune, that had played such a big role in my childhood and youth, may be in danger of disappearing. Increasingly noisy ambiances could mask it and discourage any attempts to whistle it. But perhaps more significantly, the increased mobility symbolized by transportation noise in the piece, had already created a deeper interference in family connectedness – many of us had moved away, even emigrated, and lived a very different life than our parents and grand parents. So, while the theme of the composition that you just heard, *celebrates* the whistle tune, the subsequent variations seriously *question* its survival possibilities in the environment of contemporary society.

2. For the musicologists among you I should mention that it was published in 1840 as "Symphony No. 7 in C Major" but is listed as No. 8 in the Neue Schubert Ausgabe. See for more details: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_\(Schubert\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_(Schubert))

Sound Example: 2. Familie mit Pfiff_2ndVariation.wav

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/2-familie-mit-pfiff>

Nevertheless, the composition was received with enthusiasm and the family welcomed it as a reminder of the spirited bond that the whistle tune represented in our clan. Prompted by the preparations for this talk I recently inquired with a cousin whether the whistle tune had perhaps found its way into the world of cell phone signals. He said no, but proposed immediately that we should initiate such a move at our next family reunion this coming Fall and perform an ad hoc cell phone whistle chorus! Our family soundmark might survive after all, via the disembodied digital domain back to the embodied!

The title I gave to today's talk is *The Practice of Listening in Unsettled Times*. But actually it should be *The Practice of Listening and Soundmaking in Unsettled Times*. In my Master's thesis from 30 years ago, I argued that

... a balance between listening and soundmaking (sound input and sound output) is essential to the health of the human acoustic psyche, and that the perceptive immediacy of childhood and the cultural work of artists offer strategies by which such a balance can be regained—even as contemporary urban soundscapes attempt increasingly to erode it.³

The impetus for wanting to research and explore what it means to achieve a balance between listening and soundmaking both on a personal and a wider social and cultural level, was rooted in a deep-seated imbalance that I had felt for a large part of my life. Classical music was powerfully beautiful in my childhood ears and often made me cry. For a long time I interpreted this as a terrible weakness. Years later when I was in my mid-thirties and found myself in tears for the umptiest time, but on this occasion sitting in a restaurant crying to some schlocky muzak tune in a minor key, I decided: enough already, I have to look into this! So I set out to research the phenomenon of what I called *music-as-environment* in my thesis. Paralell to that when I needed a break from my academic endeavours, I created a satirical performance piece entitled *Cool Drool*. Here is a short excerpt from a live performance during a Vancouver New Music concert in the mid-80s:

Sound Example: 3. Cool Drool_excerpt3a.wav

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/3-cool-drool-excerpt3a>

3. Westerkamp, Hildegard. *Listening and Soundmaking, A Study of Music-As-Environment*, Master's Thesis, School of Communications, Simon Fraser University, January 1988. Abstract, page iii

But like any good satire, the issues brought up in this piece were also deadly serious – both socially and personally. My vulnerability, symbolic here for every human beings' vulnerable spots, was the perfect target for a profit-seeking corporation. The thesis and the performance piece did not stop my tears altogether, but they helped for a new resilience to emerge in me. I had learnt,

...that the creative process is a balancing agent against an overload of sound input, and that one's own sound output or creative expression not only lessens the authority of externally imposed voices, but also offers a new voice of vitality and energy.

The discussion [in my thesis] focuses finally on the human body as the soundmaking/listening "instrument", and concludes that sound experienced (produced and received) *as physical process* can be an effective counterbalance to attempts by commerce and technology to transform it into product or commodity.⁴

That was thirty years ago. Now we are faced with an American president whose life blood was made in the corporate world, whose sport it is to target human beings' vulnerable spots for his personal profit and for winning an election, and for whom the environment – let alone the acoustic one! – and global warming are unprofitable and therefore of no concern whatsoever. His random twitter words and public remarks – which really are the internal noise of a confused mind externalized – have become weapons of attack (or defence depending on the context), daring the ahgast listener; enabling others to practice the same arbitrariness; and worst of all finding power in it, precisely by NOT listening to the heart or to reasoning, common sense, justice and fairness.

In the face of daily unsettling news and such non-listening it has become an urgent matter to strengthen our listening. And as it happens a rather fitting Zen Quote landed in my email inbox right at the start of my trip to the Azores:

Listening to another perspective doesn't necessarily mean we agree with it. We sometimes fear that if we take in another point of view, it will be mistaken for concession. But if we are clear in our own mind that listening doesn't mean agreement, we can open with confidence to other points of view. We can practice just listening with an open, curious, and not-knowing mind. We literally join with the perceptions of the other and become the same with them. Usually, when we listen, we still have boundaries in our mind. We want to share

4. Ibid. page iii/iv.

our experience, we are waiting to give advice, or we are holding a set of quiet opinions. Open listening is free from the usual barrage of unnecessary judgments and disapprovals that create divisions in our open field of sameness.⁵

A few months ago a totem pole was erected on Pigeon Square in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), an area notorious for open-air drug trade, sex work where many are homeless.



Figure 1. Survivors Totem Pole. Photo: Hildegard Westerkamp.

On the base of the pole an inscription reads:

Sing your song friend
Tell your story
The map we inherited
Isn't any good
The old roads mislead
We need a new map⁶

5. Musho Hamilton, Diane. *The Zen of You and Me: A Guide to Getting Along with Just About Anyone*. Shambala Publications, p. 43.

6. These words were written by Sandy Cameron, a Canadian poet, teacher, logger, and prospector. He died in 2010 and left many articles and poems addressing issues of social justice today.



Figure 2. Base of Totem Pole. Photo: Hildegard Westerkamp.

These words speak to all of us really, in these unsettled times. And indeed as the totem pole's carver Bernie Williams says,

This pole is for everybody: it represents the resilience of everyone who has faced racism, colonialism, sexism, LGBTQ-bashing, gentrification, and more... These things have really affected this whole community. We want to let people ...know that... we are here to stay, and this pole is a lasting legacy for ...all the people.⁷

The *Survivors Totem Pole*, as it is called, creates hope for healing. Its mere presence is the beginning of making such a new map. It is both a witness or listening presence and an encouragement to find a voice, “sing your song friend, tell your story.”

In the late 1970s when I broadcast my program *Soundwalking* on Vancouver Co-operative Radio, I would cross this same Pigeon Square on my way to and from the radio station.

Sound Example: 4. Soundwalking_Intro_MicPigeonSquare.wav

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/4-soundwalking-intro>

7. <http://www.straight.com/arts/821626/bernie-williamss-survivors-totem-pole-will-be-symbol-hope-residents-downtown-eastside>

At that time Pigeon Square – like the entire DTES – was a relatively harmless scene, compared to what it is today, then consisting mostly of single men with alcohol problems. You can hear some of these men’s voices from that time in this excerpt from my composition *A Walk Through the City*:

Sound Example: 5. *A Walk_excerpt_mens voices.wav*

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/5-a-walk-excerpt-mens-voices>

Life is *always* unsettled. We often choose not to notice it, though, not to attend to it. But the approach I learnt from Murray Schafer, Pauline Oliveros and John Cage is to listen to everything, including Muzak that never *wanted* to be listened to, or including that which unsettles, such as disturbing sounds and voices, uncomfortable information, issues we like to avoid. Listening in such a way requires courage, as it disrupts comfortable habits and routines. That in itself can feel threatening and elicit inner anxiety. Pema Chödrön, a Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teacher puts it this way:

Whenever there is a sense of threat, we harden. And so if we don’t harden, what happens? We’re left with that uneasiness, that feeling of threat. That’s when the real journey of courage begins. This is the real work of the peace-maker, to find the soft spot and the tenderness in that very uneasy place and stay with it. If we can stay with the soft spot and stay with the tender heart, then we are cultivating the seeds of peace.⁸

The seemingly simple act of listening to the environment often leads to unexpected complexities of thoughts, sensations and emotions that are not always comfortable. On a soundwalk we may become aware of that fluid listening between inner and outer sound worlds that I mentioned earlier, and might find ourselves in a state of uneasiness as a result. But if we stay with this soft spot, as Pema Chödrön would call it, then we can experience a sense of groundedness, what she calls peace. The nature of this fluidity between our inner and outer sound worlds is both highly personal and at the same time universal. It is here where the real and deeper journey of listening occurs.

Sound Example: 6. *Excerpt2_IDEAS showsStereo.wav*

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/6-excerpt2-ideas-showsstereo>

8. Chödrön, Pema. *Practicing Peace in Times of War*, Based on Talks Edited by Sandy Boucher, Shambhala, Boston & London, 2006. P. 29.

That was an excerpt of a recent interview with Paul Kennedy on CBC Ideas. An occurrence after a recent soundwalk with a class of students in the School for the Contemporary Arts (SCA) at Simon Fraser University demonstrates the points made here further. Most of the students had iPods or cell phones, and I asked them to bring them on the walk. They were to experiment with their habits of listening, but never to listen longer than 3 minutes at any given time and most importantly, they were to listen consciously to the transitional moments of putting the ear buds in and taking them out. A few days later I received an email from the instructor of the course:

I wanted to share with you comments from one of the students who was deeply moved by the experience. She normally wears her headphones and listens to music on her way to the School for the Contemporary Arts and after the sound walk experience a few days later, she decided to follow her normal route without headphones and attend to the sounds in the environment. She had discovered a new world of sound and image. It's a testimonial of sorts.⁹

This student challenged herself and changed her daily routine – always a subtle often unnoticed moment of unease. But the result is usually inspiration, discovery and a new freedom. Soundwalks give us that chance to practice listening to the unraveling of that *continuous now*, as we are grounded in the movement of walking and at the same time are learning to be mindful about our own soundmaking in this world.

Recently I heard about a performance that seemed to be a true expression of what I called earlier a balance in listening and soundmaking. It was entitled *Music for Natural History* and was created by Canadian sound artists Tina Pearson and Paul Walde. Although I was not able to attend the live performance I was struck by the incredibly skilled soundmaking I heard when Tina played to me recently the same excerpt that I will play to you in a minute.

9. from Cheryl Prophet, instructor of the course, private email communication, February 18, 2017.



Figure 3. Forest Diorama: bird. Photos: Tina Pearson and Paul Walde.¹⁰

In the late 1970s the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, Canada created a Natural History Gallery with exhibits of taxidermied birds and mammals, human-made trees, painted landscapes and an accompanying soundtrack of environmental sounds.

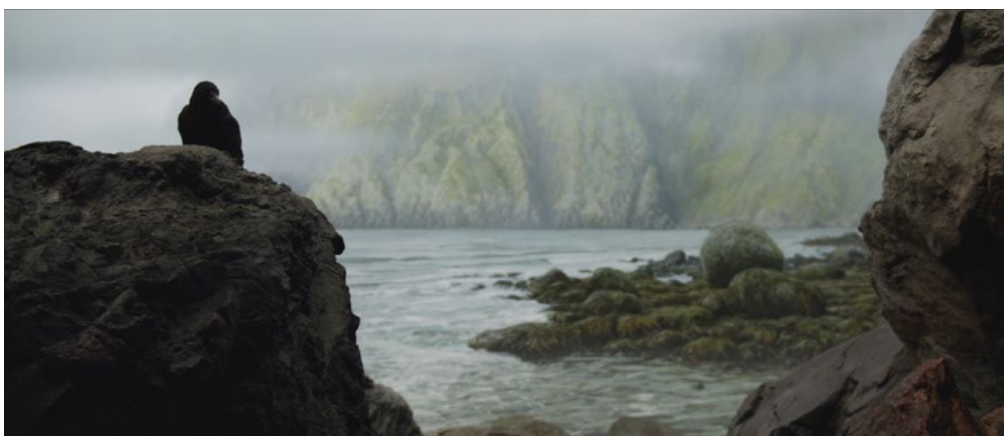


Figure 4. Shoreline and Crow.

This was rather advanced for its day with some unusual special effects, all in order to draw the visitor into a sensual experience of the Pacific West coast environment.

¹⁰. Photo credit for the next five photos also goes to Tina Pearson and Paul Walde.



Figure 5. Shoreline-birds.



Figure 6. Shoreline Puffins.

Music for Natural History was a live performance in that space, replacing the existing soundtrack with the live sounds of sixteen vocalists, sound artists and music instrumentalists that spent weeks learning to viscerally replicate the sounds of wind, birds, mammals and ocean surf of the Pacific Northwest. The creators of this performance called the piece “part tragic love song for the wilderness, part performative sound art.”¹¹

11. From program notes of the performance.



Figure 7. Shoreline Performance Group

Sound Example: 7. Audio3'30-Dawn-Burble-Surf-SL-Puff.wav¹²

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/7-audio330-dawn-burble-surf-sl>



Figure 8. Shoreline Sea Lion Duo.

The artists say further that

Music for Natural History is part of a growing global movement of art projects that intend to foster renewed connections with the biosphere. The project blurs boundaries between sonic mimicry, soundscape composition, classical music, and dada-ist sound poetry within the already paradoxical setting of the Museum's exhibitions. ...*Music for Natural History* might also be interpreted as a longing for remembering what we no longer hear, and what we no longer sing.¹³

^{12.} *Music for Natural History*, Tina Pearson and Paul Walde multichannel sound and video installation 2012–2017.

^{13.} From program notes of the performance.

The soundscape can be analyzed scientifically with sound level meters and a multitude of other measurement tools and data collection. Imagine if scientists would also learn to vocally reconstruct the soundscapes they measure and study! This might seem rather too radical if we consider how recent it is that our listening perception has been deemed important enough to be included in such analyses. The huge reluctance to be open in such studies to individual people's listening responses may be understandable because inevitably they will throw wrenches into the smooth and clean results of data collection. And of course this is precisely the difficult, uneasy part that Pema Chödrön addresses when she talks about that feeling of threat and when she proposes to stay with and attend to it. In practical terms this means that we who have acquired knowledge and expertise in environmental listening, take courage and offer our experience to those involved in academic and scientific studies of sound, acoustics and soundscapes.

If we are serious about wanting to affect real changes in our soundscapes and by extension in us, we must never forget the practice of listening as a firm, if complicated foundation for all our teachings, for our efforts to study and research the soundscape and to understand the significance of acoustic ecology on our planet.

Today, thanks to Raquel Castro's invitation to the Azores, I am coming full circle via the family whistle tune and other sonic connections, remembering another event in my life that unsettled me and my family to the core, when I was quite young. Times of crises tend to stop us in our tracks and remind us of what is important in life. Listening when taken seriously is exactly like that. I would call this the invisible forces of listening, one of those *Invisible Places* that Raquel Castro is perhaps addressing in her overall title for this conference.

The *name* of the Azores, *die Azoren* in German, has acquired what I would call, an iconic ring in my ears. Its sound conjures up a traumatic time in my life. Accepting Raquel's invitation meant that I needed or wanted to listen to this ring again – this uneasy place as Pema Chödrön calls it – and listen to it more consciously *and* in this professional context of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies.

And now, being right here on the Azores, seeing the Atlantic, feeling its mild, mellow, often very windy, humid air, and hearing its powerful waves, is actually very moving!



Figure 9. Waves at Ferreria, Sao Miguel, Azores. Photo: Hildegard Westerkamp.

Sound Example: 8. churning waves foam stereo Ferreria.wav14

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/8-churning-waves-foam-stereo>



Figure 10. The *Pamir* in a storm. Photo: Norman M. MacNeil.

On September 21, 1957 the German tall ship, the *Pamir*, sank in a hurricane 600 nautical miles west south west of the Azores.

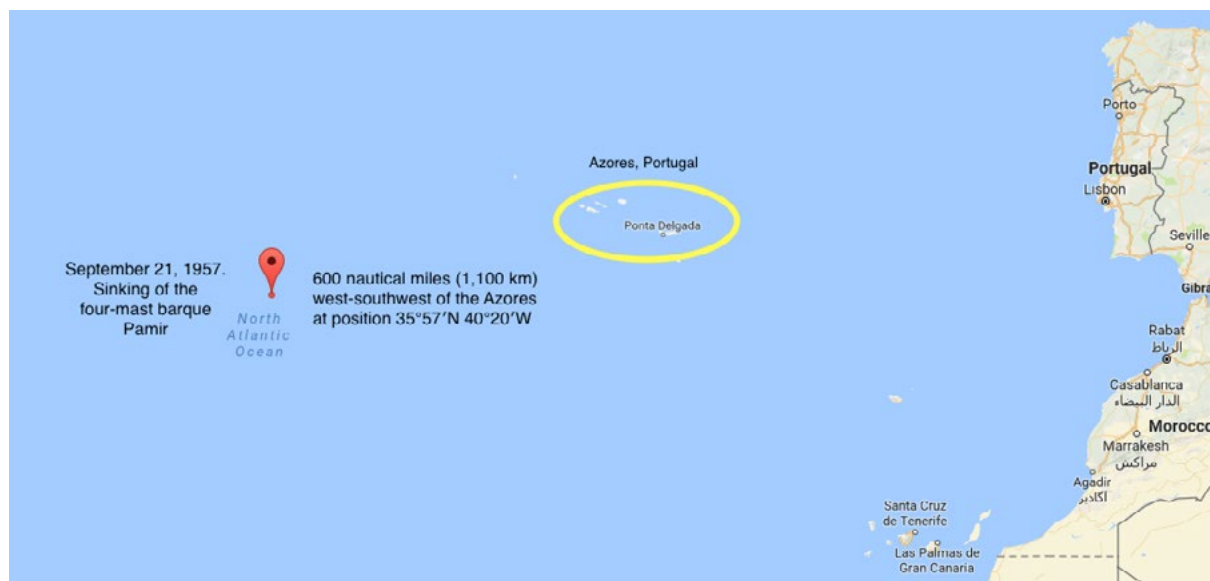


Figure 11. Location of the Sinking of the Pamir.

I was 11 years old then and heard the sound, die Azoren, repeatedly on the many news-casts after the sinking of the ship and during the week of searching for survivors. Newspaper headlines – the most intense media presence at the time – although silent, sounded like aggressive screams to me. My 22 year old brother was on that ship and was among the 80 men lost at sea. Miraculously, there were six survivors.



Figure 12. The *Pamir* in full sail.

It took me many years to understand that my brother's death also left a gift behind for me: this deeply unsettling event had given me early guidance in recognizing which situations in life would ground and inspire me, who would be supportive and who would not be. I did not realize it then that my listening towards the outside and towards my own inner sound world had received a first and tough training lesson and actually became my guide in unexpected ways. Eventually – through various detours studying classical music and never feeling right there – I became conscious of a deep sense of belonging and home in the world of sound and listening, when I discovered Murray Schafer's work and the World Soundscape Project, and shortly after Pauline Oliveros' sonic meditations and deep listening, and when later a group of us founded and developed the now 24-year old World Forum for Acoustic Ecology.

Perhaps many of you here also have had such a moment of recognition that landed you in these invisible places of listening that carry much meaning and do the connecting work between inner and outer worlds, listening and soundmaking, between the personal and professional, the artistic and scientific. Knowing this invisible place is inspirational and should be celebrated, precisely because it often may have involved difficult and unsettling times in our lives.

As it happens, yesterday was my brother's birthday. He would have turned 82. Today is my birthday. I am 71. There is much for us to celebrate in this amazing confluence of events and realities here on the Azores. So, in conclusion I will play you a short excerpt of my composition the *Harbour Symphony* that was originally performed by over 100 boats at Expo 86 for the opening of the Canada Pavilion in Vancouver.



Figure 13. *Harbour Symphony* performance as seen from above. Photo: Rick Elkin.

I had dedicated this piece to my brother at the time. Its performance was a big coming together party for the seafaring community in Vancouver and sounded – as Stephen Godfrey from the Globe and Mail newspaper described it so poignantly – “like a herd of happy elephants caught in a traffic jam!”¹⁵

Sound Example: 9. HarbourSymphony and Fanfare_excerptBeg.wav

Listen at: <https://soundcloud.com/invisible-places/9-harboursymphony-and-fanfare>

Thank you for listening!

¹⁵. Godfrey, Stephen. Expo Opening draws the bizarre – 100 vessels join fanfare of bells, whistles, sirens. The Globe and Mail, May 3, 1986.