

# MUSIC AND SOUND DESIGN IN OPEN-AIR

*balancing between human-made and environmental*

Dr Cornelis W.H. Fuhler, 2016

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## KEYWORDS

Acoustic ecology, site-specific, soundwalk, installation, environmental sounds

## ABSTRACT

Since 2010, Cor Fuhler has increasingly participated in 'soundwalks', built outdoor installations and performed music in open-air. For example, in 2016, with the 21-person-large Splinter Orchestra, he recorded a triple-cd in Mungo National Park, (outer west NSW); and he created a number of installations at Sydney bowling clubs and the Bruce Bartrim Oval in rural Tyalgum (situated in a caldera in north NSW). This paper describes some of Cor's thoughts and methods whilst being surrounded by environmental sounds: predictable, semi-predictable and unpredictable.

## OPPOSITES

In 2010, I moved from the Netherlands to Australia. In many ways these two countries are opposites. The Netherlands is a small country, less than the size of Tasmania, with 17 million people, therefore one is continuously surrounded by human-made objects and their sonic results. Australia is 186 times the size of the Netherlands and has 23 Million inhabitants, resulting in many places where a natural environment is the only presence. For example, in Australia's Mungo National Park (NSW), surrounded by nature only, I experienced a deep silence, previously unknown to me. When things become as silent as in Mungo, other 'things' start to emerge that one hadn't noticed before. Therefore, it is surely no coincidence I became increasingly involved in acoustic ecology, soundwalks and site-specific open-air performances the moment I permanently moved to Australia.



The two top pictures are from peat fields in Drenthe, a countryside province in the Netherlands where I grew up. One can see the influence of the peat industry on the overall landscape. Once this industry folded, everything was left behind and young kids like myself roamed around and played with abandoned machinery. The two pictures below show two vast and unaffected Australian landscapes: the desert and the Blue Mountains.

## DEFINITIONS

What do I mean by 'sound', 'music' and 'sound design'? Naturally and technically, all music is sound and all sound can be music. All can overlap and mostly I find this ambiguous area the most interesting to be in. Many things have been said and written on this subject and I do not wish to rehash them as this is beyond the scope of this short paper, however, because I will focus on open-air events, I will use the following definitions (which are solely made for the sake of this paper):

**Sound** - a non-human-made, usually unintentional (= without long term narrative), open-air sonic event.

**Music** - the creation of human-made sonic events (usually with intentions, narratives and social interaction).

**Sound design** - the creation of human-made sonic events that possess a certain constant; in addition to, or in juxtaposition with, a specific open-air environment.

**Performance** - music (human-made sonic events) within an open-air environment.

## SOUNDWALK

A soundwalk is a walk with a group of nonspeaking people with a focus on listening to sounds of the environment and the sonic events your own body produces (footsteps, breathing, etc.). When I was a young teenager I often walked in the forests and peat fields around my small home town and enjoyed being alone and sense the place. However, soundwalks have a different impact in the way that one shares the event with a group of people. I will explain.

My first 'official' soundwalk was in 2012 in Melbourne. Multi-instrumentalist Dale Gorfinkel<sup>1</sup> and myself guided a group of participants along a route through Royal Park, stopping at a number of places and ending with a short 15-minute concert just outside the Melbourne Zoo<sup>2</sup>. For some, walking with others without verbal communication is new and therefore strange, but usually, after a short while, participants settle in and start focussing on sonic events and other sensory aspects. For example, when talking to another person, one tends to see a limited bandwidth at eye level. When in a nonspeaking situation one suddenly notices things high up a building/tree, etc.; and when listening to a voice within a certain noisy environment, the 'cocktail party effect' eventuates:

'The **cocktail party effect** is the phenomenon of being able to focus one's auditory attention on a particular stimulus while filtering out a range of other stimuli, much the same way that a partygoer can focus on a single conversation in a noisy room.'<sup>3</sup>

Again, in a nonspeaking situation this filter will not happen and one listens to sonic events with equal attention. This can be seen as symbolic for other senses, such as sight, touch and smell.

On this particular walk in Melbourne I had brought my two sons (then six and eight years old) and they often looked like they were 'volcanos about to explode' having to keep their words inside. They just found it too difficult not to whisper something to me every now and then, however, many years later they still vividly and fondly remember this walk, which shows it had a considerable impact on them, even at that age.



A short stop during the *Winter Soundwalk* at Barangaroo (Sydney) 2016, guided by Anthony Magan<sup>4</sup> with the participation of the Splinter Orchestra, and the final performing part when all senses have been 'sharpened' by the soundwalk.

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<sup>1</sup> One can get some info on Dale's website: <https://dalegorfinkel.com/outdoors/>. Also, Dale initiated the '((( Out Hear )))' project: <https://outhear.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Officially called the Royal Melbourne Zoological Gardens, established in 1862 at the Royal Park.

<sup>3</sup> From Wikipedia: The Cocktail Party Effect, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cocktail\\_party\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cocktail_party_effect) (accessed 06/12-2016).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Magan is one of the founders of AFAE (Australian Forum for Acoustic Ecology), see <http://acousticecologyaustralia.org>, for more information.

For me personally, *the juxtaposition, individual experience versus sharing the experience as part of a coherent group, is one of the essences of a soundwalk impacting all senses and awareness of place and one's relation to it.*

## INSTALLATIONS: WHAT AM I AIMING FOR?

In the role of traditional composer, I often write for traditional instruments which possess a number of real-time parameters (harmony, volume, density, etc.) for musical processes in order to create an overall form. When making an installation, my approach has to be different. What is musical development with an inner logic during a concert, becomes a static process in relation to space and the environment during an installation. A concert is usually attended from start to finish; an installation is visited randomly for a flexible amount of time.

In my installations I aim at a sound world that is static and complex at the same time, using stochastic processes<sup>5</sup> that never repeat, but are consistent nonetheless and worth revisiting because both time and the environment will have changed one's perception. I usually make corporeal kinetic installations, with units, consisting of a combination of objects, that produce sounds/music<sup>6</sup> around a certain constant. This 'constant' is then placed in an environment, equally varying around a constant, thus creating a context. The units can be seen as modules, to be used in a variety of ways depending on the situation: windy, size of field, birds, insects, a road nearby, planes passing, etc.



Three examples of a 'module': left: fishing rod, battery operated vibrator and a number of brass objects; middle: mannequin with brass bicycle bells and vibrator inside; and right: an interactive wind-up gramophone with singing bowl and alarm bell, activated by mallets.

How do I use these modules?

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<sup>5</sup> Stochastic: having a random probability distribution or pattern that may be analyzed statistically but may not be predicted precisely. (from Apple Inc. Dictionary, v 2.2.1)

<sup>6</sup> Often, the difference between human-made and environmental sonic events is a blurred one. For example, in the case of wind chimes, what is more important: the wind playing them or the person who created the instrument and the conditions for it?

In Tyalgum (NSW, near the border of Queensland) I created an installation on the Bruce Bartrim Oval called *Listening Forest*.<sup>7</sup> I had prepared 23 modules I could use in any way on the oval. Since the oval was very quiet I decided to make a large circle and spread the modules in such a way that standing at a module, one could hardly hear the other modules. In this way, when walking from module to module, the sounds would fade in and out whilst the environment would provide a slowly changing context (in this case four: a playground, cows in meadow, a school and a road). When standing in the middle, one could hear all modules simultaneously depending on the wind, which had influenced which sound one could hear more clearly. If the environment would have been noisier, I would have placed the modules closer to one another in order to create a better balance. For *Listening Forest*, I made a provisional draft and I could increase or decrease the size of the circle according to my preference.



The draft for *Listening Forest*, the Bruce Bartrim oval in Tyalgum and my installation *Lady Bell and the Rules of Lawn Bowling* at the Petersham Bowling Club in busy Sydney in which I placed the modules close to one another so they could 'compete' with the environment: two different situations, one silent and one noisy.

## OPEN-AIR MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

The Splinter Orchestra, formed in 2002, is a large-scale ensemble, consisting of a fluctuating number of members with various backgrounds: improvisation, jazz, classical, electronic, electro-acoustic, visual art, sound art, environmental sound, acoustic ecology and field recording. Some of the members are highly skilled and conservatorium trained instrumentalists, others are conceptual thinkers playing a just found object for the first time. Despite its size (which can be 30+) the leaderless and conductor less orchestra usually hovers around minimalism, and is based on a social, democratic, gender equal, and non-egotistical view towards cooperation via improvisation, conceptual ideas and site-specific conditions. Over the years, the Splinter Orchestra has become a social and artistic meeting point and a way to test and recalibrate one's own ideas. From early 2015, Splinter resides in Tempe Jets Sports Club, near the Sydney airport, and rehearses weekly in various configurations in either their small studio or elsewhere on the premises: the bowling field, entrance hall or the parking lot.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A short fragment can be seen On YouTube: 'Listening Forest' by Cor Fuhler, Tyalgum Music Festival. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYSW3loDcgl> (accessed 05/12/2016)

<sup>8</sup> Parts of this text also appear in my paper *Splinter at Mungo, the Art of Communication*.

“For 15 years Splinter has been testing experiments in improvised orchestral music. The last two years, the orchestra honed specific strategies involving motion that manifest differently wherever and whenever they are played out.” “In March 2016 a 21-piece Splinter drove from our native Sydney to Adelaide where we performed as part of the Tectonics Festival. Midway we spent 3 days recording in the vast desert recording studio that is Mungo National Park. There are 3 movements on 3 CDs – Sunrise, Sunset and Midnight played in 3 different locations, Zanci Homestead, The Woolshed and the Airstrip. At the heart of this project is an emphasis on context — Splinter takes its creativity to one of the most powerfully resonant environmental, historical and cultural sites in Australia to ask the question, can we make a new orchestral music for this land?”<sup>9</sup>

As is usual with recording techniques, a finalized recording is a fixed balance of the involved instruments between left and right channel. The Splinter Orchestra utilizes an additional source by having one or more persons as ‘microphonist’. By walking with a hand held microphone amongst the musicians, these microphonists can use their microphone as instrument to ‘magnify’ and enhance certain sonic events, human-made or environmental. This technique can be used in a number of ways: to add perspective to two-dimensionality; or, more conceptually, by performing in one space and sending the microphonists’ output to a PA in a secondary space where the audience resides.



The Splinter Orchestra at Tempe Jets Sports Club (2015).

The above picture shows the orchestra performing *Microphony* on the bowling field of Tempe Jets Sports Club, whilst the audience is listening to the hand held microphones through a PA in the main hall. By contextualizing the dialogue of sonic events from musicians and sounds from their direct environment, a different light is shed on the performance and the audience becomes increasingly aware of environmental sounds that otherwise might be taken for granted, e.g., a birdcall can be outside our focus in a concert situation (as mentioned: the cocktail party effect), but when presented through a speaker it becomes part of the whole.

In *Microphony* the microphone moves around positioned musicians as opposed to *Air Hockey* in which the musicians move around positioned microphones. In *Air Hockey*, a performance area (the ‘arena’) is defined beforehand. The participants go, in a more or less straight line, from somewhere

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<sup>9</sup> From the Splitrec website, a label run by musician Jim Denley: <https://splitrec.com/> (accessed 06/12/2016).

on the borderline to another point on the borderline, whilst playing a more or less clearly definable sonic event. They alter this when 'bouncing off' the borders of the arena. Whenever two (or more) people accidentally collide they stop and play together whilst others join them to form a cluster of musicians creating a musical event. This process repeats itself multiple times during a performance in an improvisational fashion. In this way, independent, individual sonic events (human-made music and environmental sounds) continuously occupy the space as a whole, and a clear overall form is generated via the 'co-op clusters' and their musical statements. During the recordings in Mungo National Park, this concept was used a number of times in a number of different outdoor spaces.



Splinter Orchestra recording in Mungo National Park: during sunset at the 'Walls of China's' pristine sand dunes and during sunrise at Zanci Homestead, an abandoned ruin with left behind agricultural machinery.

## FINAL WORD

Musical performance is one of the few situations in which I personally can fully concentrate, focus and be 'in the moment'. Playing music outdoors, participating in soundwalks, and building open-air installations has noticeably affected my experience as sound artist, moreover, it has impacted my practice as a 'traditional' musician on a stage inside a standard music venue. Maybe I can compare it with the following: I was born and raised in a small country town dominated by nature, farms, animals and trees. When I moved to crowded Amsterdam in 1983 (to study piano at the conservatorium), I carried my 'country attitude' as a protective buffer to survive in a city environment. Similarly, experiences playing open-air can impact performance practice in traditional venues and we all should play/listen outdoors as part of our musical education, whether busking or participating in soundwalks. Open-air events are continuous balancing acts and they have helped me deepen my understanding of who I am and how I relate to place and time: the essence of being a musician.

Cor Fuhler, February 2017, Wahroonga.