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Interview with Murray Schafer

This interview was conducted at the University of York (UK) in May 1975, and covers three topics: Schafer's time in Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, his outlook on present day Canadian music and his thoughts on his recent work.

KSP I believe you lived for quite a while in Britain around 1960.

RMS About one and a half to two years. I originally went to Vienna because I thought that Vienna was the centre of all things musical, which was a pardonable idea, I suppose, for a young man to have.

JCS When was that?

RMS In 1956. I ambitiously saved all my money working in the merchant navy and I went to Vienna to study music. I arrived there and went to the Academy, but quickly realised that I couldn't study music because I wasn't really all that interested in the people that were teaching there. One didn't hear any music of Schoenberg, Berg or Webern, or even Mahler or Bach for that matter. All one heard was everything from Mozart to Bruckner. There was simply nothing other than the mainstream Viennese tradition, and so I studied medieval German instead to fill in the time. When that money ran out I came to this country because I could support myself here, and I also had a Canada Council grant. I studied for a while with Peter Racine Fricker, but I don't think he really influenced me very much. One of the things I did in this country was a book of interviews with British composers.[1] *

KSP A very interesting book.

RMS I think it's reasonably good. The composers were chosen fairly carefully, so that each one, if not necessarily a great composer, is nevertheless characteristic of a particular school. In other words, Malcolm Arnold is there because he writes a particular kind of music which, regardless of what I think about it, is a part of today's musical scene. Again, Alan Bush writes a very different kind of music: it is perhaps not so much his music that makes him interesting as his political ideology. It's unusual to have a communist composer who firmly believes in the Revolution writing that kind of music in this country, and writing in a style which I accused him in that book of being really rather bourgeois.

JCS Do you have any general feelings about composers of that kind? I'm thinking particularly of Cornelius Cardew.

RMS I don't know anything about his current work, but I always find that sort of conversion suspect, although interesting. It seems to me that there are very few people who've had a total conversion mid-way in their career and still managed to produce something really significant following it. In any case, I certainly prefer the sort of person who works organically towards a goal to one who suddenly has a vision in mid-career and then abandons a certain direction: perhaps in order – this would be unkind to suggest – but perhaps in order to gain a wider following.

KSP What was your own music like when you first came to this country?

RMS It was very tonal, perhaps a bit polytonal in places. The only work of significance from my early period is the songs that I wrote on medieval German texts called *Minnelieder,* a work in which many people would rightly detect a Mahlerian quality. It was only after my ear had been exposed to the music of the more contemporary people that my music started to change.

KSP And the beginning of the 60s was quite an exciting time in British musical history . . .

* Notes at the end of the article.

RMS It was a good time for hearing lots of music of different kinds. In Europe, Vienna was a washout and in Paris one only heard French music. But in London at that time all kinds of music were available as they were in no other European capital. And there was a great deal of contemporary music, not only the younger people, but of course the classics: Schoenberg and his pupils were being vigorously pushed by the BBC. So there was a lot of activity at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s: probably more than there is now. Looking at the papers, I'm rather shocked at the small amount of contemporary music which goes on in a big city like London now. I think there was more then.

JCS It appears to have got stuck somewhat: the BBC seems to have discovered a good thing and then failed to move on.

KSP Obviously these things can't go on for ever. It's a perfectly natural state of affairs to have a surge and then a stagnant period. And of course, there's the question of money: contemporary music is always one of the first things to go.

RMS I'm sure this is true. Because it has a small audience, it tends to be attacked. It's a question too of the direction in which people want to take music. Perhaps there's a wave of composers here that are taking music in other directions, like Cardew, which results in the post-war avantgarde now appearing unfashionably old. Consequently there's not a great deal of excitement or interest in it.

KSP But there also seems to be less excitement – full stop. There aren't so many new things to get excited about.

RMS I think you're right about that. I think it was a wave, the crest of a wave. It was a good time for me because I heard a lot of music, and having come from Canada where one just didn't have the opportunity of hearing that kind of music it was an invaluable experience. When I went back, I started the Ten Centuries Concerts in Toronto which were, I suppose, modelled on Glock's BBC Invitation Concerts, involving a wide range of music, including jazz.

KSP How was it like to go back? Did your music change at all?

RMS Yes, it began to change, but very gradually. I'm a slow learner, and so I reflect on things and think about them for a long time before there's a noticeable change. I think the changes are on the whole organic. I've used the word before – I like it; it seems to me the way I am. There have been enormous changes. If I think back to that period of 1960 and the kind of 'imitation Berio' I was writing then, and I think of what I'm doing now, there have been enormous, staggering changes.

KSP So the changes from about 1960 were in a broadly avantgarde framework, for want of a better word?

RMS I don't think I ever threw away tonality entirely, because even if the music was serial, it was serial not in the conventional way, but in the sense of writing things with long extended series of rhythms, and using certain intervals, such as a minor second or a perfect fourth, in all their possible permutations. This kind of procedure gives a certain tonal quality to a piece. There was a tonal feeling in a lot of my music all the way through: there still is.

KSP Where did the music-theatre aspect come in, as it has done to some extent? I was thinking particularly of the big opera.

RMS In about 1963 I decided that I wanted to write an opera, or I'd rather call it a work for the stage. I got a commission from the French network of the CBC to do a work for television. And the resulting bilingual piece, called *Loving* in English and *Toi* in French, is the only commissioned opera for television that we've ever had in Canada. Then there's *Patria,* which will eventually be in three parts of which two are now complete. Only the second part has been produced on the stage. It's a very experimental piece. It uses about 40 languages, actors, singers, a chorus, electronic sounds and dramatic effects – slides and so forth. Originally I wanted to write a work for two completely separate stages. It was to be performed simultaneously in two theatres which would be superimposed. In other words, having one stage at one end of a huge auditorium and the other at the other end, and the audience somehow moving between them. That was a technical trick that I couldn't master, so I finally converted the piece into works which would follow one another and be thematically related, but dreamlike in themselves.

KSP What are they about?

RMS *Patria 1* is about an immigrant in a new land, who finds it difficult to make contact with anyone around him because they speak different languages or nonsense languages. The audience tends to sympathise with him because he speaks the lingua materna of wherever it's performed. He speaks English if it's performed in an English theatre. The second part, *Patria 2,* is about a girl in an insane asylum who is surrounded by doctors, nurses and other patients who also speak in different languages. They try to interpret what she's saying but they do not understand. It's another study in isolation and alienation. The suggestion is that although the doctors and nurses are making interpretations of these crazy lunatics – including the protagonist, the girl – it is they (the doctors and nurses) who are mad, because they come out of our society. The girl, by comparison, is really rather rational and sane. The third part, which yet remains to be completed, is somehow linked up with the two protagonists, who in terms of the symbolism that's used, in terms of their intimations of an alter ego or companion or shadow figure, seem to be the person from the other drama. There are some notes on how it works which make it clear. They're works which are quite experimental, I think. The only problem with doing things like this is that if you do them in Canada – and I don't mean to put my own country down – their fame might not spread very far. Let me put it this way: if Stravinsky had written *The Rite of Spring* and done it in Vancouver, no-one would have heard of it yet. So there are certain disadvantages in doing things and putting them on in places where the important critics are not. I think that the effect of that work would have been quite different if it had been put on in any other place where people who are more familiar with contemporary idioms and the contemporary interest in theatrical experimentation could have seen it and sensed it.

JCS But wouldn't it be true to say that every Canadian composer faces an element of what you're talking about to a certain extent: this question of preparing a work for where the important critics are going to be?

RMS There *is* this difference. Don't misunderstand me – I'm not complaining – but a Canadian composer has certain problems that a European composer does not. Canada is not taken seriously as a place where music is generated. I think we're taken quite seriously inside the country now, but it will take some time before we're taken seriously outside. Let's talk about the English, for example. I think you have an attitude towards composers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and so forth, which – I'm not trying to be rude – is conditioned by your attitude towards your former colonies. We can be accepted if we come to Great Britain and make a reputation here, but certainly nothing like the amount of broadcasting time that our CBC gives to British music – by courtesy of the BBC – is given to Canadian music in Britain. It's a two-sided attitude. The attitude of the people who are producing culture and disseminating it in Canada is that if you're any good, you'll get your music performed somewhere else.

JCS Would you say there is still persisting in Canada the rather romantic way of looking at Britain, part of which is the tacit assumption that anything that goes on in this country is automatically good? I would have thought that if anything it's probably declining, but is this to some extent the reverse side of the coin we've just been talking about?

RMS I think there is a feeling that Europe in general represents culture, and that if God had intended Canada to have culture Mozart would have been born there.

KSP But the USA has got over this one now.

RMS The USA has got over this, but it's had 200 years of independence for one thing – we've had 100 years. They have a much larger population than we do, and in every aspect of their life they've been encouraged to build a culture. Canada has not really, even in 100 years of independence, been encouraged to build a culture: it's been terribly dependent on the culture of Britain. All the music that was written in Canada 50 years ago greatly resembled the music that was being written in Britain, and not necessarily the best of it either.

JCS This is something that has been pointed out fairly forcefully by Alan Gillmor in his article.[2] One thing that strikes me in comparing the USA with Canada is that Canadian music is now where American music was in the early 1930s, when several composers were beginning to emerge who were managing to say something which was specifically their own, rather than imitating other styles. Of course there are exceptions in the States before this, but, generally speaking, one can assume that since the 1930s there has been what can loosely be called an American music. Would you say that this parallel was true?

RMS Except that we're into perhaps a different era of world history when nationalism is not quite as fashionable as it was in 1930. That militates against a nationalistic, Canadian style of music. On the other hand, there are some composers who are writing things that could not be written in any other country in the world. The music of Harry Somers, Harry Friedman or even myself reflects a society where there's lots

of space and a correspondence in the mind to a physical landscape that is devoid of people. That bleak, hard-edged landscape of the north comes out in a certain bleak, rugged quality which I do not find in the music of, say, the Italians. I think that's as far as I'd care to take it.

JCS You mentioned the decline of nationalism as a force. Couldn't it be said that through its very structure Canada is almost a living example of this decline in that it isn't really – one isn't intending a criticism by this – a nation? Couldn't it be that because of its social heterogeneity and mosaic-like culture it might throw up composers who are going to be very significant in the future?

RMS Certainly there are cultural differences. There are many different cultural pockets in the country, and the government is very concerned to keep them.

KSP On the topic of declining nationalism, it did seem that at the time you were first in Britain there was a lingua franca, an internationalism made possible by the new serialism. It was supposedly a common language which would do away with the nationalistic barriers and the nationalistic music of the past.

RMS There was that kind of feeling in those days. I used to be interested in this too until I saw the results of it. We were all in favour of internationalism until we realised that what it really meant was that we were going to be drinking Coca Cola in Persia, that one airport was going to be exactly like another, and that every piece of commercial crap was going to be spread around the world in greater and greater volume. For that reason, if for no other, I'm now in favour of a retreat into, let's say, a more parochial attitude towards culture; of trying to find your own culture in your own area; of trying to find out who you are and what makes you different from people in other places. It's not nationalism in a political sense, it's just trying to retreat from the great commercial machine that's been set in operation.

KSP But isn't an important part of that to do what I thought you were bemoaning? That is, not to be just parochial but to create an art for your community, for your own people, and not to be concerned whether the critics come and hear it? It's important to create a music for your own country or for your own region. Since Canada's such a big and diverse country, you can't create a music for Canada, so you create one for your own community.

RMS Yes, I would agree with you entirely about that. If there seems to be a contradiction in my own mind, it's because I'm in that entr'acte stage myself, of not quite knowing whether I should release all of my interest in international affairs and simply concentrate on a smaller area. But I suppose the fact that I've recently bought a farm in northern Ontario and am going to live on it represents some kind of a decision in terms of finding that parochial culture, even if it means going down and conducting the village choir again, and seeing what you can build up in the way of expressing something which the people are capable of doing, and which you can help to assist them achieve. I'm quite in favour of that, and have never been very far from it, I think, temperamentally.

JCS There are some tremendous parallels here with your Soundscape project, insofar as each community could be helped to determine its own sound environment. Is this part of the entr'acte you were talking about?

RMS Yes.

KSP How do you see your own music fitting in with your interest in the Soundscape project? How do the two connect up?

RMS They do insofar as a lot of things that I've learned about the soundscape are probably reapplied in musical expression. For example, we discovered when we measured the water of the Pacific Ocean lapping against the West Coast of Vancouver Island that the breakers came in approximately every eight to ten seconds, and I've found that makes a very nice kind of movement. It happens to correspond approximately with our breathing when we're in a relaxed state, and one can develop that musically in terms of an articulation - in phrasing, for instance, - that has a parallel to wave motion. I really feel that in this sort of way art can intimate, I won't say a higher reality, but it can intimate alternative modes of existence, alternative modes of living. And that may be one of our tasks as artists: to suggest other states of consciousness or other modes of existence in terms of say, the tempo of music, the kinds of frequency areas that one deals with, the kinds of textures and the way in which sounds are put together. I think we could learn a lot from the natural soundscape and perhaps incorporate it into art: perhaps save some of that natural soundscape before it's completely destroyed.

R. MURRAY SCHAFER

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JCS How difficult do you think it would be to get that sort of music accepted? For one reason or another the composer and the general audience have got so far apart that to try and convince people that a particular type of activity is art, and should be taken seriously, sometimes becomes extremely difficult. Do you see any difficulties in this direction, particularly if you're using sounds from the environment or even, indeed, composing the environment? To many people such a notion would be bordering on the nonsensical as far as their concept of art is concerned.

RMS Very often the things that stare us in the face and are the most transparently clear are the things that we refuse to see. The vision is too abrupt and too frightening to contemplate. I was suggesting yesterday[3] that it's unmistakable that 20th century music has been incorporating more and more sounds of the environment into it, particularly through electronic music and musique concrete. If composers can bring the sounds of the environment into the concert hall and present us with a musicalised version of them, then it's a very definite step to say, all right, let's simply transform the concert hall into the environment, let's take our knowledge and our techniques and so forth, and go and work a bit out there. It's a perfect development, it seems to me.

JCS But, by your own admission, what's simple and obvious just doesn't gain acceptance, does it?

RMS The resistance, as you remember, was that people said they didn't want to have the environment organised. I would only point out to them that I'm talking about organising it after one has given it a great deal of consideration and study. There are already people who are organising the environment purely for economic or other reasons which are equally irresponsible socially. My attitude is: listen, if you're going to put up something like that, I want to be consulted about it. It's a soundscape matter, I happen to be concerned about the soundscape, I've given sound a great deal of thought and study, and I'm concerned about the aesthetic aspects of it – not merely the other, more conventional acoustic aspects.

KSP How does the World Soundscape Project fit into this?

RMS It's a research project designed to study the soundscape; the way in which the soundscape has changed through history; the way in which our impressions, our perceptions of sound have changed, and from that to perhaps be in a better position to make recommendations in terms of the design of soundscapes of the future. I don't think I see this as an imposition of anyone's will. On the contrary, it would give me great pleasure if people all over the world would start to take the soundscape seriously, question it, criticise it, and think of changes that they want to initiate in their local soundscape. The only way you can get an impression of soundscapes past is by reading through vast quantities of literature, taking out every reference to sound, putting it on card index and putting that into a computer, which we'we done.

JCS Haven't you also been able to make some very educated guesses at the background noise of cities in the past?

RMS Yes. I made the assumption that if the ambient noise level is changing, there are certain sounds in the acoustic environment that must be heard above the ambient noise level: we call them signals. There are certain social signals that people must be aware of in a community: for instance, emergency vehicle signals – police car, ambulance and so forth. If one could measure those over a sufficient period of time, and discover any change there might be, one could then understand how the ambient noise level beneath that had also risen. To put it very briefly, we measured a contemporary siren in Vancouver in 1974 at 120 decibels on 'A' scale at about ten metres, and then measured all the emergency vehicle sirens that were ever used in Vancouver back to 1912. In 1912 the 'La France' siren was 88 decibels measured in exactly the same way. So you see, there was a rise of approximately 30 decibels over 60 years, or half a decibel per year. The assumption is that the ambient noise level has risen in the same way.

KSP Do you think the ambient noise level will continue to rise?

RMS That is the assumption. There's a theory I have about the 'sacred noise'. There are people in society who wish, for one reason or another, to have very special power. Very often those people accumulate that power by producing the biggest noise in society. I call that noise 'sacred', because those people put themselves into a position where the criticism of the noise becomes difficult or impossible. To criticise the noise is to be unsocial. For instance, the church bell in the Middle Ages was the biggest noise that the village or the town produced, a sound of about 85 decibels measured at the base of most churches. The church was the seat of power in the community. With the industrial revolution, it was the industrialists who usurped that position. Maybe the custodians of power today are the police and the military: the police and military can still make as much noise as they want with their jets, with their sirens or whatever, and people are afraid,

apparently, to come out and say that 120 decibels for a siren is too much.

JCS But you also get a counter-culture, I suppose, or an alternative culture with 'pop' music. This culture is very anti-police and anti-military, but produces as much, if not more noise.

RMS They try to steal the 'sacred noise' away.

KSP It would be very difficult to go into a disco and ask them to turn it down.

RMS Exactly. But the mere fact we've discovered that people are trying to produce sounds that are destructive – and any sound over 120 decibels can certainly be classified in that way – might get people to start thinking of alternative ways of dealing with the sound environment. The fact that we have criteria in terms of industrial hygiene for hearing loss in factories suggests that we're on to the industrialists now. We're criticising the noise they're making. We're saying: cut it down, you can't go on destroying the hearing of your workers the way you have been doing for the last 200 years. But this question of sheer volume is only one dimension of sound. There are also many other dimensions of sound which we should probably stop. One type of sound we're hearing much more of in the 20th century that was never heard before is that of steady-state hums and drones. This was made very clear to me when I went to Iran a few years ago. I listened to the stonemasons hammering, and I suddenly realised that all the sounds I was hearing were discrete or impact sounds. There were no steady-state drones that you get with the internal combustion engine or electrical devices. That is a big change which has occurred in the soundscape. And one thing for sure is that a drone such as this produces a certain drowsiness or state of boredom. The effect of changes like that on our behaviour is a subject which would be very interesting for psychologists to study.

I must tell you about the 50- and 60-cycle hum of electricity. We have a 60-cycle hum in Canada which is approximately B natural, and in Europe there is a 50-cycle hum which is approximately G sharp. When I'm doing relaxing exercises with students I've produced what I've called 'the note of prime unity', the sound that seems to come from the centre of your existence at any particular moment. They start to hum the sound spontaneously, and more often than not the sound has been B natural, even when there is no audible hum. When I was in Germany the note the students started to produce was G sharp. So I'm sure that sounds do affect us in mischievous ways, and it would be very interesting if more people spent more time studying just how they are affecting us. I think the B natural or G sharp expresses a certain basic and fundamental sort of quality, maybe the sort of quality for our society that Wagner sought in E flat: the big E flat chord at the beginning of *The Rhinegold.*[4]

NOTES:

[1] Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

[2] Alan Gillmor, 'Contemporary Music in Canada – 1', *Contact 11* (Summer 1975), pp. 3-13.

[3] Schafer is here referring to a seminar he gave in the Music Department at the University of York.

[4] For further discussion of Schafer's ideas and the work of the World Soundscape Project based at Simon Fraser University, Canada which he initiated, see Schafer, *The Music of the Environment*, No. 1 of an occasional journal devoted to soundscape studies edited by Schafer (London: Universal Edition, UE 26751, 1973). This is reprinted under the same title in G.S. Metraux, ed., *Music and Society* (*Cultures 1*, No. 1, 1973), pp.15-52; the journal is obtainable in Britain from HMSO. For a review of this, see, *Contact 12* (Autumn 1975), pp.41-42. Alan Fillmor's second article, 'Contemporary Music in Canada – 2: the avant-garde and beyond', *Contact 12*, pp.15-24, contains a brief discussion of Schafer's educational booklets as well as his music. Further information on the World Soundscape Project can be found in David Toop's brief introduction in *Musics*, No. 5 (December 1975/January 1976), p.12. Schafer has now left Simon Fraser University, but both the Project and his interest in the field of soundscape studies continue. His book *The Tuning of the World*, which outlines soundscape research to date, will shortly be published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

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