

Personal reflections: Michael Wins

Ear Cleaning

Music academies, and thus also the Hochschule für Musik und Theater (HMT) Rostock, are places where the ear is trained in a special way. Singers and instrumentalists have to listen carefully, differentiate, and tune into the whole musical ensemble and environment. The issue of “ear cleaning” is what interested me most in Raymond Murray Schafer’s book *The Soundscapes. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1994 [1977]), because I like to play around with the perception of my environment. This is conditioned by my own compositions in which I use day-to-day-sounds in that I alienate them or work them into my songs as mood bearers. Furthermore I like humanizing sounds such as that of an old moped which seems to comment in an irritated way on a steep street.

I am in favour of Schafer’s reflections on “noise pollution”, i.e. thinking about which sounds pollute our ear and which ones clean it. Following Schafer we probably live a kind of tsunami of noises from different origins. Be it motorways, factories, construction sites, rock concerts, or different day-to-day-noises, these sounds are mainly produced by humans and appear within a vast amount of noise.

The question of how one can react against such noise pollution was probably answered on my trip to Warnemünde on a quiet Sunday when trying to catch the sounds of harbour and beach environment. As it was unexpectedly quiet that day, I was able to perceive many unexpected sounds. I heard the whipping of the sand corns against the grass, the bursting of the waves on the stones and was able to localize the seagulls through their sounds.

But what does this trip have to do with the HMT?

The day after this excursion to Warnemünde I passed some time between lectures in the canteen and suddenly felt destroyed by the wall of noise that I was used to and actually had never perceived before. The sound of cutlery, dishes, moving chairs and many loud voices was overwhelming. This wall of noise is what we students call “rest period” between our studies and rehearsals.

As I can not act as an acoustic designer to interfere in the HMT acoustics, I have decided to from now on enrich my ear with no-day-to-day and calming sounds so that they can find a place in my life and music.

Impressions of the recording from 20 December 2010 at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater (HMT), Altstadt, Rostock

For the recordings in the HMT, I used a Zoom H4N Handyrecorder plus a wind shield for recordings of the inner yard at the recording rate of 44,1 Hz/24bit.

Rehearsal rooms:

My personal and spontaneous association with the sounds coming from rehearsal rooms was creating a musical composition within the genre New Music. A composition for different instruments, voice, door and step sounds along the fitted carpet. As I arrived at the rehearsal rooms via the nearly empty foyer, I was surprised that the floor with the rehearsal rooms was quieter than the few conversations and steps in the foyer, which was constructed of tiles and stones.

Canteen:

This is where students meet in the break between rehearsals, lectures, and seminars for studying or taking their meals. As I usually looked forward to the meals and meeting my friends, I had not realized so far how loud and contaminated with noise this room constructed of tiles and stones is. By closing my eyes and forgetting food and conversations, I even felt destroyed by the acrid sounds coming from a non-definable bulk.

Library:

As the library seems to be one of the quietest rooms of the HMT, I was surprised to find so many sounds there. But only after listening to the recording for several times at home I observed further sounds.

Inner yard:

Here, the sounds of the rehearsal rooms, the canteen, and the low sounds of the environment such as the lo-fi sound of the traffic come together.

Composition becomes design: my song “Mein Herz”

One must not always use musical tools such as the interval of a falling second to express sighing or special harmonies in order to transmit special effects and moods, but can also rely on day-to-day or special sounds to enrich the mood of a musical composition. These sounds can be used as they are or transformed by further effects.

This is why pop music design courses exist next to classical composition studies in music academies with a popular music expertise, such as the Popakademie Mannheim.

Inspired by the Soundscapes Rostock seminar at the HMT, I composed a song. The local sounds of Warnemünde gave me the idea for a story or scene for the song which you can hear in a short version on this website under “Sound Art”. Nature sounds such as the sound of waves, masts, flags, and grass at the beach as well as harbour sounds were recorded in December 2010 in Warnemünde with a Zoom H4N Handy Recorder plus wind shield. I chose these sounds as they signify home for me, and also because they give the song the facet of coming home after a stormy seafaring journey. I consciously put these natural sounds into my song. I only partly adapted them to the metre by adapting for example the arrival of a wave to the crescendo of the refrain. The analysis and treatment of the nature sounds, as well as the musical sound carpet, made me realize that both of them were ready compositions on their own and that I had to bring them together. Whereas the sound of waves dominates the beginning of the song, they become weaker during the song and give space for side noises. One hears seagulls, masts, flags in the wind, and in the end the voices of children who promenade accompanied by their mother. The end can be interpreted as a desire to have children or the return to one’s family.

Final remark

I am happy to have participated in this course because it produced some precious experiences. Already before this course I had an ear for day-to-day sounds and their use in my songs, but I had not expected to discover more layers and meaning in the recording of certain environments through approaches learnt in this seminar. This course as well as the recording, analysing, and processing of sounds has definitely enlarged my sound understanding and I am thankful for that.