

## **Musical Soundscape:**

### **Teaching the Concepts of R. Murray Schafer to Elementary Students**

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**Published in Canadian Music Educator, vol. 50 No. 4, Summer 2009**

## **Introduction**

The date, July 18, 2008 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of Raymond Murray Schafer, one of Canada's most prolific and renowned composers. Throughout Canada there have been recent celebrations of his music including tribute concerts by the National Arts Orchestra and the Winnipeg Symphony. Since much of Mr. Schafer's career and writing has been dedicated to music education, it seems fitting to present a music unit that introduces younger elementary students to his music and concepts. This paper offers lesson plans designed for students in Grades 3 to 5. The students will participate in musical activities which illustrate three concepts: ear cleaning, soundscape, and synthesis of the arts.

Schafer's concepts in music education and composition have been described as "avant garde." He is an innovator who has frequently crossed the boundaries into uncharted musical experimentation. He rarely composes for the traditional orchestra, choosing instead unusual combinations of instruments. And, when traditional instruments are used, he often requires the players to use unique special effects such as glissando and microtones, and, reversed mouthpieces.



Fig. 1: This street scene in Toronto illustrates the sounds of the city soundscape.

His compositional style was solidified during the years, 1965 to 1975, when Schafer taught at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. It was here that he founded the World Soundscape Project. The purpose of the project was to investigate and analyze the sounds around us (See Fig. 1). The influence of this long term project can be found in his later compositions. These involve outdoor performances held in a specific environment and performed at a specific time of day.

The sights and sounds of the outdoors become part of the composition. An early example is "Music for Wilderness Lake." It is scored for 12 trombones to be played along the shores of a lake.

In addition to being a composer, Schafer has authored several books and pamphlets on various subjects ranging from Ezra Pound to music education in the classroom. It is his philosophy of music education that will be the focus of "The Musical Soundscape Unit." Schafer is a firm believer that children must be allowed to create their own music even at the very beginning of their musical education. He laid out 3 principles for teaching music:

1. Try to discover whatever creative potential children may have for making music of their own.
2. To introduce students of all ages to the sounds of the environment; to treat the world soundscape as a musical composition of which man is the principal composer, and to make critical judgments which would lead to its improvement;
3. To discover a nexus or gathering-place where all the arts may meet and develop together harmoniously, (Schafer, p. 243).

He continues by offering these ideas as a supplement to traditional music education, not a replacement. These "Musical Soundscape" lessons will explore three of Schafer's concepts: ear cleaning, soundscape, and, synthesis of the arts. The activities will include music making, sound analysis and listening to Schafer's compositions. The lessons are designed for elementary students in Grades 3 to 5. Each lesson requires approximately 45 minutes. They can be taught consecutively as a unit, or, each lesson can stand alone.

### **Ear Cleaning**

Schafer states that in order to participate in musical activities, one must first be able to listen clearly and accurately. This ability has been lost, he believes, because of the constant barrage of sounds that are around us in everyday life. We have effectively tuned out these sounds and as a result, our listening skills have been compromised. "Ear Cleaning" involves re-tuning to the sounds around us, analyzing them, and, then imitating them accurately. "Ear Cleaning" is the first process in music education.

## Ear Cleaning Lesson Plan

1. On a large paper, write the words: Music and Noise. Ask the students to define each word. Write down their ideas.
2. The next 2 activities are designed to improve listening skills and at the same time stimulate creativity. The students sit in a large circle. They will be asked to make up a sound using a single piece of paper. The paper is given to one student. After that student makes a sound, the paper is passed to the next person. The second student will imitate the sound made by the first, and then make up a new sound. The next student will imitate that new sound and then make up another original. The paper is passed around the entire circle in this way.
3. This time, the students will be making sounds with their voices. Begin with a discussion of the different ways in which one can use the voice; whisper, yell, sing, talk, tongue clicking etc. Re-do the circle as above, but, replace the paper sounds with vocal sounds.
4. The next exercise is the imitation of a sound using voices and is taken from Schafer's music education pamphlet, "Ear Cleaning". (Schafer, p. 81). Play a set of bamboo wind chimes. Discuss the sound in objective terms such as: how long does the sound last; is it loud or soft; is it fast or slow. After the discussion, ask the students, as a large group, to use their voice to imitate the sound. The teacher will direct the sound with hand signals. Discuss the similarities and differences between the sound of the bamboo chimes and the vocal imitation.
5. Students will be listening to Schafer's composition, "Epitaph for Moonlight." This piece was composed as a result of a workshop that Schafer led with Grade 7 students in North York, a suburb of Toronto in 1964. The students were asked to invent a word for "moonlight" in a private language. These invented words are the text of the piece. Read the following explanation of the title as explained in Schafer's own words. "In 1969 American astronauts landed on the moon to the excitement of the whole world. But something died then. No longer would the moon be a luminous and mythogenic symbol; it threatened to become a piece of property covered with neon. That hasn't happened yet, but in today's polluted cities with their

twenty-four-hour glare, no one even notices the moon anymore. The moon is dead. I saw her die", ([www.patria.org/arcana/programnotes.pdf](http://www.patria.org/arcana/programnotes.pdf)).

6. Before the students hear the piece, focus their listening by asking the following questions.

Describe the different ways in which the singers use their voices.

Make up your own invented word for "moonlight."

What feeling do you get when listening to this piece?

Do you think that the moon is "dead" as Mr. Schafer has stated?

Alternately, you can ask the students to draw an image as they listen to the piece. The image does not necessarily have to be of the moon. After the piece is finished, discuss the questions and ask the students to share their images and ideas.

7. End the lesson by asking the students to leave silently while listening to all the sounds around them.

## **Soundscape**

Schafer is the founder of the "World Soundscape Project" which began at Simon Fraser University in September of 1972. He received grants from the Canadian Donner Foundation, Unesco and several private sources to establish the project. The "Soundscape Project" is "a hybrid study that crosses acoustics, geography, psychology, urbanology, and aesthetics into a new discipline dedicated to improving the acoustic environment in which we live" (Adams, p.3). The goal of the Soundscape Lesson is to focus listening on the sounds of the environment.

## **Soundscape Lesson Plan**

1. Using the large piece of paper from Lesson One, add the word Soundscape and ask the students to define it. Write down their ideas. After they are finished, explain that "Soundscape" is the idea of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. Soundscape is modeled on the word, landscape. While landscape is the physical attributes of a given area of space, soundscape is the sounds in any given area.

2. Ask the students to listen silently for 20 seconds and identify at least 1 sound they hear. Discuss the sounds that were heard. On another large piece of paper, write the following categories: Natural Sounds, Human Sounds, Sounds of Tools and Technology. Categorize the sounds heard.
3. The students will be looking at a copy of a painting by Pieter Breughel from 1556 entitled "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent." This painting is used by Schafer in a lesson from his pamphlet "The New Soundscape", (Schafer, p. 99). Put the students in groups of 4 or 5 students. They will work together and write down the sounds they imagine would have been heard in that scene. They will put the sounds under the three categories.
4. The students will now explore the Soundscape outside the school using a pencil and a clipboard. They will write down all the sounds they hear outside under the three categories. Upon returning to the classroom, the students will pick one sound and re-create it using either their voice, body percussion, or, a rhythm instrument. Knowing this ahead of time, will help them focus on the outdoor sounds. The students will be asked not to talk or share ideas while they are listening. Walk outside collecting the sounds for about 10 minutes. (See Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2**

Below is a copy of the sounds collected by one of the authour's grade four students outside the school. This student chose to use sand blocks to recreate the sound of footsteps on the sandy playground.

Natural Sounds	Human sounds	Sounds of tools or Technology
Birds, wind, bees buzzing, water, so many birds.	Footsteps, pencil pushing, voices, sand swooshing on feet, rocks crumbling on feet, shouting.	Air conditioning, cars, planes, soccer ball.

5. Upon returning to the classroom, the students will choose a classroom instrument with which to re-create one of the sounds heard outside. The students may use their voice or an available instrument.
6. Each person will take a turn to "play" their sound individually. After playing it, the student will reveal what they were re-creating and why they chose the particular instrument.

7. The whole class will “play” the soundscape together with the teacher conducting. Lead a class discussion comparing their musical soundscape to the outdoor soundscape.

8. End the lesson by asking the students to leave silently listening to all the sounds around them.

### **The Music of R. Murray Schafer**

Schafer was a pioneer in music composition. And, as such, many of his pieces were scorned by critics and the general public. He rejected formal music education for himself, preferring to pursue his interests and learning outside of the university system. He did, however, find teachers and mentors who guided the development of his unique style.

Many of the signature techniques in Schafer's music will be explored in the composition lesson plan. Schafer experimented with non-traditional sounds in his compositions. These were achieved in several ways. He may ask the player to create sounds on a traditional instrument in a non-traditional fashion. An example of this can be heard at the beginning of String Quartet #8. One violin is playing a strong pizzicato passage while another is playing a slow glissando.

Schafer included many non-traditional instruments and sounds in his compositions. “North White”, composed in 1973 for the National Youth Orchestra of Canada is a piece for orchestra with snowmobile and other sounds from non-musical materials such as metal pipes and metal sheets. The white in the title refers both to white noise and snow. Toward the end of the piece, the snowmobile is started and the loud sound of the motor becomes an instrument in the ensemble.

Increasingly, through his career, Schafer included other forms of artistic expression within his compositions. “Cortege” requires the players to wear masks during the performance. “No Longer Than 10 Minutes” cleverly involves the audience. The title mocks a quote from the commission he received from the Toronto Symphony in 1970. He was told that the piece should be no longer than ten minutes. The final section begins with a full orchestra crescendo led by the percussion section. During this crescendo,

the conductor leaves the stage while the sound is diminishing. The audience, thinking the piece is over, begins to applaud. During the applause, the percussion begins another crescendo and decrescendo as the applause dies away. This is repeated every time the audience begins to applaud. At the premiere, the orchestra was instructed to continue playing until the conductor returned and signaled the downbeat of the next piece. Understandably, the audience was very confused in this situation and reviews were extremely mixed.

Schafer's most recent production has been "Asterion: A Journey Through the Labyrinth." The performance occurs in a wilderness setting at a specific time of the day or night. This allows the surrounding environment to be a contributor to the performance.

The Composition Lesson Plans will use several techniques from Schafer's compositions to guide students to create an original musical composition. Their work will explore Schafer's concept of "synthesis of the arts" by including additional art forms in their final product. Because the students will be learning techniques, creating and then performing a piece, three lessons will be needed to complete the unit.

### **Composition Lesson Plan One: Learning Techniques**

1. Begin by discussing the idea of "special effects" and how many different sounds can be made on the same instrument. Examples on traditional instruments include glissando, pizzicato, trills, tone clusters. This idea can be illustrated by playing the first minutes of Schafer's String Quartet Number 8.

2. The students will then be asked to choose an instrument (rhythm instrument, voice, or body percussion) and invent a special effect on that instrument. For example, instead of tapping on a drum, a sound can be made by rubbing on the drum head. Three different students will conduct the class playing their sound effects, in turn for one minute each.



**Fig. 3**

One of the author's grade five students, blew into the hole of the guiro to create a special effect.

3. The students will be listening to "Miniwanka" a choral piece which depicts various forms of water: rain, stream, waterfall, lake, river and ocean. The text consists of these words from several languages of the First Nations. As the students are listening, ask them to identify the water forms and describe what sound is used to represent the image.



**Fig. 4**  
Class list of sounds heard in a meadow:  
birds, bees, grasshoppers,  
grass swishing,  
mosquitoes, wind blowing,

4. After experimenting with special effects, and, listening to a piece by Schafer, the class is now ready to compose an original "Soundscape." They will be composing a sound piece that describes a walk through a meadow on a sunny summer day (See Fig. 4). They will imagine something they might hear, then, choose an instrument that both sounds and looks like their choice. And, they will invent a way of using facial expressions and/or body movements when playing the instrument that depicts this choice. The total effect of our joint composition will be to re-create the soundscape through a synthesis of music, visual art and theatre.

5. The students will have about 5 minutes to choose their sound and movement. The whole class will perform their piece with the teacher as conductor. The class will be divided into 4 groups. Each group will perform their part of the meadow separately. This allows the students to listen to the created soundscape. Then, the whole class will perform together with the teacher conducting.

### **Composition Lesson Plan Two - Composition**

1. Listen to Schafer's "Beauty and the Beast" in its entirety. The students will take notes while they are listening. Focus the students' listening by making suggestions about what they could draw or write. The students can draw images; identify special effects used; name instruments and how they are used to represent particular characters; identify how the music creates different moods throughout the story; which sound did you particularly like.



2. After listening, lead a brief discussion, asking the students to share some of their notes.

3. The students will then work in groups of 4 or 5 to re-create a well-known fairy tale using only sounds. Each group will be assigned a fairy tale and be given a picture book to use as reference. Examples of fairy tales that would be suitable are: Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Bremen Town Musicians, Rumpelstiltskin. The students will have the rest of the class to complete their composition. The composition should last between 2 and 3 minutes in length. Their composition will use instruments, vocals, visuals, acting and movement.

3. The students will be writing directions for performing the piece as they compose. The directions will include the sounds and stage directions.

### **Composition Lesson Plan Three - Performance**

1. The students will have 10 minutes to rehearse their Fairy Tale that they composed during the last class.

2. Each group will perform in front of the class.

3. After each performance, the students can give feedback to the performers by answering the questions; What did you like about the performance? What mood was created by the performance? Did the sounds make the performance more interesting, and, how?

### **Conclusion**

All of Schafer's writings on music education were put together in the book, *Creative Music Education* in 1976. The five pamphlets were originally issued separately from 1965 to 1975. During this ten year period, Schafer conducted workshops with students and teachers to share his ideas and concepts. Many of his ideas which seemed extremely radical at the time, are now common in classrooms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, cooperative learning, ie; having the students work together in small groups, is well used in today's classrooms. The work of Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple

intelligences has opened the door for using the arts in collaboration with other disciplines. What Schafer has called "synthesis of the arts", has expanded into the integration of cross-curricular materials. Additionally, compositional techniques, such as graphic notation and the use of electronic instruments, have been used by contemporary composers for the past fifty years. The audience's ears are now more familiar with these sounds as part of the new music. It would appear that the pioneering work of R. Murray Schafer has indeed been adopted into our education system.

But what of our modern soundscape? Schafer wanted to create awareness of environmental sounds, both natural and man-made. He was concerned about the loss of natural sounds to the strong blasts of modern technology. However, in today's environment, the ubiquitous use of personal music devices has only served to further tune out the soundscape. Instead of improving the noise around us, we are simply using technology to ignore it. The presented lessons offer students the opportunity to re-tune to the sounds outside of the head phones. The activities allow younger elementary students to experience listening, analyzing and making music. The emphasis is on active participation. Through this active participation, the students are living Schafer's belief that everyone can and should make music. As he says, "Music is nothing but a collection of the most fascinating and beautiful sounds made by people with good ears and affectionately remembered by humanity", (Schafer, p. 250).

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