

**(Re)politicizing musical listening. Analyzing *His Master's Voice* (Hildegard Westerkamp)**  
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## MUSICAL LISTENING

Recent musical history can be read as a history of listening and its various mutations. Whether it is with the ‘acousmatic’ practices of musique concrète, John Cage’s experiments with the anechoic chamber, the distribution of the musicians of an orchestra in the hall among the audience as Xenakis did in *Terretektorh* in order to generate a closer listening, composition based on the ‘idiosyncrasies of perception’ by Jean-Claude Risset, Luigi Nono’s ‘tragedy of listening’, Helmut Lachenmann’s ‘defenceless listening’, Glenn Gould’s listening through technology, Pauline Oliveros’ ‘deep listening’, the ‘signed listening’ project carried out by the IRCAM, or Francisco López’s ‘blind listening’, musicians and theorists have often returned to a focus on listening (cf. M. Solomos, 2019: Chapter 3).

Within these explorations of musical listening, several trends question the classical model that culminated in Romanticism and lasted through modernity. The classical model runs thus: the subject and the object of its listening, the musical work and sound, are somehow detached from the world, and the world plays itself out within them. The work becomes a universe, and, by analogy, animates the world’s conflicts and promises that they will be resolved in a kind of utopia. Hegelian idealism was the basis of this conception of musical listening, which was then magnified by Adorno’s philosophy of music, especially the theory of ‘structural listening’ (cf. T. W. Adorno, 1962: Chapter 1). This conception of listening is a wonderful way of exploring music’s capacity to move people; however, focusing as it does on subjectivity conceived as pure interiority, and suggesting that everything occurs within ‘music itself’, it tends to place musical processes within the sphere of the personal. Critiquing the theory of the autonomy of music, Hildegard Westerkamp writes: ‘the Western aesthetic separates the experience of music from its social context. When one is moved by the music in that sense, one is moved *internally*, privately, as an individual’ (Westerkamp, 1988c: 71).

This conception of listening depoliticizes music. When employed in today’s societies, in which common space tends to be increasingly lacking, it risks becoming the opposite of what it should be: instead of emancipating the individual, music risks becoming an instrument of control – through, for example, the use of music and sound to promote consumption (advertising, Muzak, etc.) (cf. Westerkamp, 1988c) or as a means of coercion (sonic weapons, for example: cf. J. Volcler, 2011) The aim of several movements that question the classical model is surely to repoliticise listening by re-introducing it into common space. Without abandoning the impact of interiority, listening opens itself up to the world – to a world that has not been sifted by its analogical representation through the work.

## HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP

To illustrate this question, as time is limited, I will refer to the creative work of Hildegard Westerkamp, a pioneer in acoustic ecology, whom I have just mentioned.

We are aware of the importance of listening in Hildegard Westerkamp's work. She defines herself as belonging to 'a now much larger community [that of acoustic ecology] of listening people, all of whom are concerned not only for the quality of the world's soundscape but also for the quality of listening in general' (H. Westerkamp, 2003a: 3). Indeed, the first number of the journal *Soundscape. The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* (2002), edited by Westerkamp, is dedicated to listening (cf. Ex.).

# *Soundscape*

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**Cover of the journal *Soundscape. The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* no.1.**

Listening has often been overlooked in the musical tradition. Seen as a passive, receptive activity (culturally coded in terms of femininity and subjection) as opposed to words and acts (coded in terms of masculinity and power), it is associated with a form of 'obedience'. To quote the eighteenth-century theologian Emanuel Swedenborg: 'The Spirits which correspond to Hearing, or which constitute the province of the Ear, are those which are in simple Obedience [...] If these spirits are like this, this is because the relation of hearing to language is like that of passive to active, as like the relation of him who hears speech and acquiesces to him who speaks: whence too in common language, "to listen to someone" is to be obedient: and to "listen to the voice" is to obey' (E. Swedenborg in J.F. Lyotard, 1991: 178).

For Westerkamp, on the other hand, listening equates to empowerment, and it can even have a ‘disruptive’ power, as she explains in her lecture ‘The Disruptive Nature of Listening’. Listening should be understood as an ongoing attention: ‘I am suggesting, that our listening be an ongoing practice, so present and attentive that it asserts change inside us over time, and as a result eventually in the soundscape, in our communication with others, in society at large. It is a state of ongoing attention’ (H. Westerkamp, 2015). This ‘ongoing attention’ – which comes from within us – is focused on our environment. In the same lecture, adapted for Paris 8 University (Saint-Denis, France), she says: ‘At this moment I am – we are – in Saint-Denis, France. It is March 22, 2016. We are together in this room. Are there any sound characteristics that would give us an idea of which city we’re in?’ (H. Westerkamp, 2018).

### ***HIS MASTERS’S VOICE***

I would like to show this disruptive listening, this empowering listening - ultimately this political listening - at work in a piece by Westerkamp that I recently analyzed for my forthcoming book *Exploring the Ecologies of Music and Sound. The Living World, the Mental and the Social in Today's Music, Sound Art and Artivisms*. This is the brief piece *His Master's Voice* that Westerkamp composed in 1985 as a pure montage, a montage that gives you usually passive listening. The piece is a collage of masculine voices: voices that dominate by the orders they give, by their peremptory tone or by their mere presence – a presence that evokes the male domination prevalent in our societies. In Westerkamp’s own words:

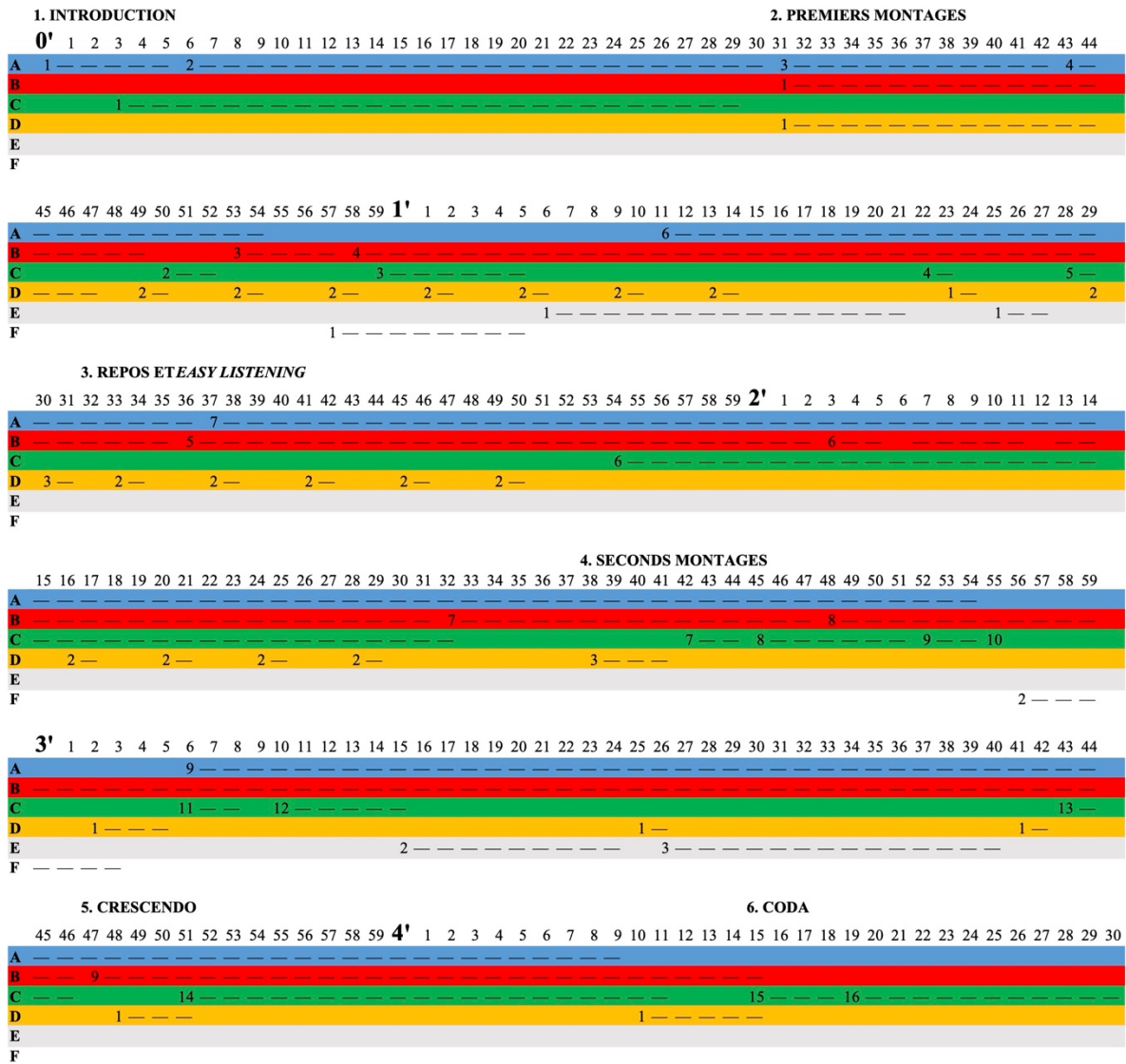
*His Master's Voice* is a collage of the ‘macho voice’ as it appears in all walks of life: on the street, in the media (AM/FM radio), in the political and religious realms, in the contexts of popular culture and of high culture. For *His Master's Voice* I have disconnected the macho voices from their settings and have re-contextualized them with each other. The message of the piece is as blatant as the voices themselves which penetrate our lives. The difference is that in daily life we often are numbed to them and we internalize their message with little resistance. *His Master's Voice* makes them audible in all their blatancy. Perhaps it also makes us look more rigorously at what it covers up (H. Westerkamp, 1985b).

Other sounds are also heard, and they serve to make these dominating voices emerge more clearly. The shock provoked by the montage is salutary, even though the listener cannot fail to be marked by it. *His Master's Voice* is unique in Westerkamp’s oeuvre. It is, by its nature, an aggressive piece, poles apart from her masterly use of mixing, which is the opposite of collage. We should also remember that the title is not without significance: it is a reference to the famous logo of the British record label ‘Gramophone’, which later became *His Master's Voice* – a logo that used the painting of the same name by Francis James Barraud (**exemple**).



***His Master's Voice*, l'œuvre la plus célèbre de Francis Barraud (domaine public).**

The following analysis aims to bring out the details of the montage and do justice to Westerkamp's musical art. In theory, the technique of montage is the antithesis of music, if by 'music' we understand the great European (Germanic) tradition of development, a tradition within which Westerkamp herself was brought up: she grew up in Germany and was surrounded by the music of Bach and the German classical composers. However, there are many elements of 'musicalisation' in this piece, from a formal point of view. This analysis is based on listening, but is enriched by the composer's own notes about the provenance of the sound sources in the montage. The diagram in **Example** shows the progression of the whole piece, which is discussed below.



**Diagram of the form of *His Master's Voice*. Key: A (*Lohengrin*) and B (drum machine) are the layers of the continuum; C (radios), D (street sounds, loop of screams and sounds from games gallery), E (nazi Germany), F (musical samples) are the layers of the montage. For the figures, cf. the analysis.**

There are six distinguishable sonic layers. The first two form continuums, providing continuity over which the montage can be grafted. We will call these two continuums A and B:

A. The famous *Prelude* (sometimes known as the *Overture*) to Wagner's *Lohengrin*: the opening of *His Master's Voice* (0'00" to 0'05"), sounding as though it were in a concert hall before the concert begins. This could, then, be a live recording, and the prelude begins at 0'06". It seems to play throughout *His Master's Voice*, that is, we hear about half of the complete piece, even though it is barely audible, or even inaudible in some passages. The choice of Wagner is doubtless connected to the voices from Nazi Germany that we will hear later in the piece, even though *Lohengrin* was composed in 1845-48, before Wagner embarked on the nationalism on which Nazi Germany was later to place so much value. This is a wise choice: the subtle sweetness of the prelude forms a perfect backdrop for the montage of masculine voices, whereas a piece such as the *Ride of the Valkyries* would have been too obvious.

B. An electronic drumbeat – 'drum machine sounds (new technology at that time', Westerkamp comments – is omnipresent (but sometimes less audible), and it transforms itself and sets the dynamic for the piece. Its role is to provide continuous rhythm, but it also probably a reference to commercial music, open to criticism both for representing a macho world and for being a pure product of 'music-as-environment', which Westerkamp denounces (1988c). The development of this beat plays a key role in the crescendo in the fifth section of the piece (see below).

The four other layers consist of montages. These are:

C. Montages of voices from the radio (some of which are repeated). This is the most important material in the piece, or at least the most striking (except, of course, the Nazi voices). There are 16 excerpts altogether (with some repetitions), from 2 to 38 seconds, taken from local radio (from Vancouver, where Westerkamp lives) Canadian national radio, and US radio. The first one, which plays an important role, is of music, and another important one is a piece of 'easy listening' (C6, 1'54"). Elsewhere, we hear sports news, advertisements, general news and religious messages. The montage culminates with sermons given by Jim Jones (C13, 3'43" and C14, 3'51"), the founder of the People's Temple cult, where, in November 1978, 908 people (including 300 children) were killed. s

D. I have grouped three types of sound together here:

1. 'Recording of late-Saturday night street sounds in Vancouver, early 1980s, in the prostitution area on Davie Street then (my recording)'. We hear various repetitions of different extracts from these recordings, which sometimes sound like the screeches of cars braking or turning a corner, or like men's drunken-sounding shouts, sometimes with suggestive sexual content (e.g., 'I want you': 0'45" and 3'02").

2. 'Loop of some guy singing/shouting (high-ish voice repeats behind drum machine)'. This loop (always the same one) lasts about two seconds, and is sometimes fairly loud and sometimes barely audible.

3. 'Sounds from games gallery (my recording)'. We hear this only twice, briefly, but it is prominent.

E. Nazi Germany. This sends a shiver down the spine: it is impossible to remain unaffected by the voices of Hitler and the impassioned crowd (E1, 1'06'' and E2, 3'15'') or by the voice of Goebbels (E3, 3'26''), which Westerkamp takes care to join with that of Hitler – presumably because she assumes, correctly, that Goebbels' voice is less well known. These extracts are used frugally, but certainly no one, having heard them, could fail to associate them with the voices of the announcers in the musical samples (especially the first one, C1) – these voices seem anodyne but are in fact just as authoritarian in their listing of the composers who form the canon. It is likely that the samples of Hitler and Goebbels (and the crowds) were broadcast on the radio at the time – we know how important radio was for the Nazi regime: cf. C. Birdsall, 2012 – which makes the link to the radio montages even stronger. In terms of their source, Westerkamp tells us that they come 'from an old recording on an LP (don't have exact source)'. The Goebbels samples comes from the famous speech given at the Berlin Sportpalast, in which he advocated 'total war' (cf. <https://archive.org/>).

F. The final layer consists of just two samples, both brief but significant for Westerkamp, given her musical background. They are both musical samples, from Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* (F1, 0'57'') and *Baby Let's Play House*, sung by Elvis Presley (F2, 2'56''). Musicologists, who now have some grounding in gender studies, may reproach Westerkamp for quoting a gay composer in this montage of macho voices, but it is very likely that, in 1985, few people were aware of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality.

We don't have time to make a linear description of the room. I just want to say that it is made up of six consecutive parts. I suggest you listen to the entire piece, it lasts only 4'30'' long. Let's listen to it by following the diagram I made with the six layers:

→ A

→ schéma



I haven't prepared a conclusion, I think the listening to this piece speaks volumes enough to explain how we have a lot to gain today from (re) politicizing listening to music!

Thank you for your attention.