

MY LIFE WITH MUSIC (#27), from: *Die Zeit Online*, 16 July 2006

Listening to Nature

Andreas Bick, the author of this piece, is a composer. In his search for inspiration, he ventures out with a microphone to capture the sounds of glaciers, frogs and volcanoes. He tells us about his experiences with the sonic side of everyday life.

I remember a long winter during my childhood. When it finally began to get warmer again, we children would play beside a nearby lake that was still frozen over and which seemed to glow in the setting sun. There were cracking noises and whiplash fractures, as intimidating for us as the thinness and fragility of the ice. As a test of courage, we dared each other to go out as far as possible onto the ice sheet. I can still clearly remember the uneasy feeling out there and the eerie noises that sounded like electrical flashes, spreading right across the lake.

I failed the test of courage, but I continued to be fascinated by strange, mysterious sounds. In the mid-eighties I moved from the countryside to Berlin, plunging myself into a new life. I played in underground bands, worked as a taxi driver and experimented with all kinds of studio equipment. As a way of getting to grips with my new surroundings, I made recordings of everything that crossed my path: I secretly taped passengers in my taxi, I documented the sounds in the courtyard, and when the May Day riots exploded, I was there with my microphone. Over time, I built up an acoustic archive that preserved places and moments I would otherwise probably have forgotten. Listening to my recordings, I could summon up images and reawaken feelings with a depth of focus I was unable to achieve using photography. I began to explore the soundtrack of my life, keeping an acoustic diary: the microphone was my pen and the magnetic tape (now replaced by a hard drive) was my sheet of paper.

I went on journeys, discovering strange noises and exotic soundscapes. The world became a source of raw sound material, and the remoter the place, the further from civilization, the greater the promise of discovering a new sound or a still more intense listening experience. I listened to the snarling and breathing of a volcano, heard the thundering of calving glaciers and experienced the absolute silence of the desert. In my ears, the rhythmic singing of cicadas, crickets and frogs sounded like the vibrant heartbeat of the Earth, and inside my headphones, I had the impression of being granted permission to listen in on Nature's creative dreaming. For me, there was no longer any difference between the sounds of nature and the music made by humans. There was a transitional zone where the two overlapped and which I saw as the source of human music-making: a form of invocation of nature through imitation.

In the meantime, I had begun to write music for films, and I asked myself whether there might not be ways of incorporating my impressions of nature into my work as a composer. In scientific publications, I happened upon studies that described numerous natural phenomena as random processes that could not be predicted but which nonetheless repeatedly generated similar patterns, resulting in an inexhaustible wealth of forms and structures. I understood that this was where the

key to my observations lay. Moreover, this understanding of nature suggested compositional techniques that allowed me to play with Nature's sounds and translate Nature's pulsating rhythms into music. I began to devise set-ups that could be used to elicit random but highly rhythmical behaviour from water drops. In the ripple patterns on desert dunes, I found models for a rhythmic score. And the many available recordings of crickets and frogs gave rise to a piece full of complex rhythms, blurring the dividing line between the oblivious, unintentional sound-making of Nature and composed music. Today, I cannot imagine my life without this kind of attentive listening to nature; it is an everyday necessity, part and parcel of my curiosity towards the world.

Last winter was long and hard, and the lakes around Berlin were frozen over for weeks. Equipped with an underwater microphone, an ice drill and plenty of warm clothes, I went out one evening onto the Liepnitzsee, which lay silent and black under the bright moon. In the vague hope of discovering sounds beneath the surface, I drilled a hole in the still rather thin ice sheet and lowered the underwater microphone into the cold water. What I heard through the headphones was astonishing: a large number of cracking and crackling sounds, the louder ones generating tones that continued to resonate for a long time, falling off into bottomless depths. Sounds with an almost synthetic and otherworldly feel unfolding beneath the layer of ice, but barely audible from above. The ice was a huge oscillating membrane, channelling discharges of the powerful tensions within the ice in all directions. The loudest cracks shot through the whole lake and made the ice shudder. I was impressed - the most bizarre, surreal sounds less than thirty minutes' drive from my apartment in the city! Is it music? I don't know. But the sounds speak to me and have something to tell me, if only I listen long enough.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell