Soundwalks:

Soundwalks and environmental sound recording, performed and interpreted in the Victorian Gold Fields

Ros Bandt

Most people interested in acoustic ecology and environmental sound art have experienced some type of soundwalk.

I am thinking of;

A 1993 soundwalk in the early morning in Banff, Canada led by Pauline Oliveros at the inaugural World Forum of Acoustic Ecology Conference… Being told “no tape recorders allowed” during an organised walk at the Abbotsford convent… International artists coming to Melbourne for festivals and leading us through our well worn acoustic pathways the next day for their ‘soundwalk’… Trying to download the app for a soundwalk in the windy dark Docklands to experience a solitary ghostly reinvention of someone else’s soundwalk which doesn’t work after paying anyway… The indigenous walk on the Yarra River run by the Koorie Heritage Trust in which the whole body and all the senses are deeply connected to country as sung land… Of taking an environmental group through my acoustic sanctuary and listening to the bush and the aeolian harps singing country gently in the breeze.

The intimacy of walking through a space or terrain with one’s ears as the primary focus is an individual experience, if not private. How much can we really share about what is heard? Two events recently in the central Victorian Goldfields, Castlemaine and Bendigo have extended the notion of “re-hearing” the soundwalk already made, through performance.

For the Castlemaine Festival, Jane Curtis, programmer for the Central Victorian ABC radio, decided to play my Fryerstown winter soundwalk as part of her curated playlist sound concert, In the Dark, a series of stories and recordings played to a seated audience in the
Phee Broadway Theatre. This soundwalk is published on my blog <hearingjaarajaara2013.wordpress.com>, and forms part of an in depth study, public performance and acoustic symphony, recorded on CD 7 JaaraJaara Seasons. Experiencing this soundfile in a blacked out theatre designed for other purposes was strange. This reframing meant there was a theatrical rather than experiential intention. A simple walk through the wet bush and kangaroo highways seemed to convey the raw honesty of a human in the outdoors. Bark crunching underfoot my simple verbal descriptions, audible breath close to the microphone and the movement of the body passing through the sonic habitat were the only sounds. This recording was never intended as a performance, just a diary of a winter’s day experienced in the box ironbark forest at the acoustic sanctuary. I pondered on whether all recordings as published documents are suitable for public presentation? Are they profound, well prepared, worthy? Do they need to be? I had to agree with a friend I bumped into at interval, about the position of the recording of my walk that was on after the introduction to the Castlemaine area by Rick Nelson, an elder of the DjaDja Wurrung nation, which turned out to be in fact perfect. We all share the land. Jane’s choice had worked well in context. It’s not a walk, its not radio, its a concert of recorded sound. It became a tiny point on a larger whole. A part of something else!

Also part of the Castlemaine Festival, the new Birdsong CD by the Trio Avium (Ros Bandt, Ruth Wilkinson and Cynthia O’Brien), was launched in the old Castlemaine Market, with bird recordings in surround sound and amplified baroque music by European composers for the Castlemaine State Festival. Situating Boismortier, Couperin, Van Eyck and Biber in Victorian Goldfield dawn chorus recordings was as it should be, since Australian flowering forests such as the local Australian box ironbark, have sourced the world’s songbirds from the start but it was an unusual experience for most baroque music fans. The concert began with an improvisation on the medieval alba, Reis Glorios, of the provencal Bornelh, accompanied by local Australian dawn birdsong and later Ruth Wilkinson premiered my piece Magpie Remix for solo recorder and magpies in 6 speakers. The piece was written in Fryerstown in 2004, recorded for CD in Cortona Italy and returning here, 10 years later in a new form, shorter and with multi-tracked and spatialised magpie recordings from Fryerstown area. It
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was the first time Magpie, the notation and the recordings had been performed in the local area. The birds had an immediacy as the multi-channel sound recordings of the local magpies I had recorded were enhanced and mixed live by engineer Jim Atkins. The soundscape version just published on the new Trio Avium Birdsong CD was the multi-channel sound for the exhibition Magpie, an exhibition of Photography, Sculpture and Sound at the Tate Gallery, Old Fryerstown school for the month of March 2015. The magpie, the piece and the birds themselves became a popular community event as the visitors contributed their magpie stories in a book. All the magpie sounds in the room were recorded within half a kilometre of the exhibition and local photographer, Marion Williams captured baby magpies learning to fly and growing up in real life. These baby magpies were well known to local people who had watched them grow. A short video of the babies squawking was put behind the door as a surprise set of young voices amid the refined mixed composition. With the door open to the bush, it was often unclear what was recorded and what was happening outside. These deep connections were profoundly appreciated throughout the month and the magpie was celebrated through the recordings, beautiful sculpture and photographs.

Viv Corrigan, the well known English sound artist visited me last year and invited me to share a soundwalk with her. She planned to record and interpret it at a later date, perhaps as a basis for a further performance along with other Australian soundwalk recordings she made with other artists while she was in Australia. This year she returned and constructed a sound installation in the Conservatory in Rosalind Park Bendigo, an event organised by Undue Noise and sponsored by the Bendigo city council.

This is the diary entry I made on the day of the event.

This evening, Greek Easter Thursday, we travelled by Train to Bendigo to hear the English born sound artist Viv Corrigan perform in the conservatory in Rosalind Park at 6.00 p.m. with Jacques Soddell of Undue Noise. This 20 minute performance was the second one of the day, the other at 12.00 noon. Two professional sound artists improvising from their well prepared sound palettes was intriguing, sensitive and quite beautiful in their spatial separation in the glasshouse. Vocal phonemes and utterances were interspersed with computer files and samples of...
crisp sonic gestures: Two people, two seats, two speakers and the light fading in the autumn sunset. This was a concert performance which was sensitive to the time and space, flowers, water fountains, frangipanis, ferns and chrysanthemums. But what of the sound walk here? The intervening installation, a 14 minute loop played between midday and 6 was a piece Viv had constructed from sound walks she had taken on her last trip to Australia. She recorded Warren Burt, Anthony Magen, Ros Bandt and Catherine Clover and used the recordings in her own way, cutting layering and selecting the elements into a sectional piece entitled Shadow Walks. Certain moments of “I love noisy cities and bellbird interjections” alternated with trains and remote women’s chat, creating a somewhat dislocated soundscape in the tranquility of the conservatory with its large urn fountain. Yet moments of coincidence saved it. A willy wagtail flickering on the roof in the sunlight romped, as Anthony Magen described the importance of nature as habitat, and small bats provided fresh recordings for the artist on the day.

An installation on a loop repeated so many times is an artificial construct, very different from an experiential walk. Fourteen minutes is probably long enough for a person to spend in this small venue, but it is a lovely place to sit and listen. It made me think about sound recording and its function.

Where is the microphone, why is it there, for how long? What happens to the recording, and for whom is it made? What do we experience from this and what do we learn about the world, to what ends, artistic, scientific, acoustic, emotional?

Andrew Skeoch, a Victorian Goldfields sound recordist has dedicated his whole life to recording the environment in wild habitats the world over. With his wife Sarah, The Listening Earth has published exquisite CDs which bear testament to skill, dedication, time, travel and the care taken in recording. <http://www.listeningearth.com.au/LE/index.php>

Skeoch’s lecture on Why Music Happened to a packed house in the Phee Broadway theatre next to the Castlemaine library in April was an innovative lecture-performance presenting new research theories on bioacoustics, interpreting sound recordings as the main evidence. Why Music Happened? was subtitled birdsong, music and the evolution of listening. It asked and answered the questions: “Why do humans
make music?” And, “why does it reach so deep into our emotions and psyche?” He considered how nature uses sound to communicate, survive and adapt. By analysing the position and temporal placement of various species in the recordings, he was able to pinpoint specific behaviours and adaptability such as the lyrebird’s orientation of their mating season to winter to avoid competition for their large repertoire of mimicry. Competition proved to be less important than co-operation from an analysis of the birdsong recordings. These sonograms and their colourful analytical presentation made very complicated scientific information available to the professional and layman alike. Without the tool of sound recording this could not have happened.

I enjoyed these performances, and installations; playing a soundscape bird concert, designing the collaborative exhibition with surround sound recordings of local birds, and listening to a lecture on the bioacoustic aspects of birdsong. Sound recordings are now part of many experiences and encounters, which can take many forms. It is pleasing to see the creative approaches taken to sound walks, sound recording and its interpretation in the Victorian Goldfields in 2015. Creative adaptations refine the perceptive field of listening for the audience in different ways from those available while trapping the sound at the moment.

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Ros Bandt Sound Artist 16 May 2015