

## When loud Weather buffeted Naoshima

### A Sensory Walk

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#### **Abstract**

Walking isn't just walking. A walk, especially if you don't concentrate on seeing, stimulates the senses. When musician David Sylvian visited the Japanese island of Naoshima in winter 2006 to record sounds for his ambient track "When loud Weather buffeted Naoshima", he had in mind that the listener should hear the song with an MP3 player during a slow walk around the island. The recorded sounds should mix with the sounds that are created while walking: noise from cars and other pedestrians, wind, birds and the sound of the sea.

The aim of the article is to reflect on the sensory walking experience that accompanies Sylvian's work. Other sensory sensations, such as the smells of the island and the tactility of the subsoil there, which I collected during a visit in March 2018, should also be taken into account.

**Keywords:** sound, soundscape, sound-walking, sensescape, David Sylvian, Naoshima

“What was the first sound heard? It was the caress of the waters. Proust called the sea ‘the plaintive ancestress of the earth pursuing, as in the days when no living creature existed, its lunatic immemorial agitation.’ The Greek myths tell how man arose from the sea: ‘Some say that all gods and all living creatures originated in the stream of Oceanus which girdles the world, and that Tethys was the mother of all his children.’ The ocean of our ancestors is reproduced in the watery womb of our mother and is chemically related to it. Ocean and Mother. In the dark liquid of ocean the relentless masses of water pushed past the first sonar ear. As the ear of the fetus turns in its amniotic fluid, it too is turned to the lap and gurgle of water. At first it is the submarine resonance of the sea, not yet the splash of wave. But then...

... the waters little by little began to move [...]

Waves whipped into surf, pelting the first rocks as the amphibian ascends from the sea. And although he may occasionally turn his back on the waves, he will never escape their atavistic charm. ‘The wise man delights in water,’ says Lao-tzu. The roads of man all lead to water. It is the fundamental of the original soundscape and the sound which above all others gives us the most delight in its myriad transformations.” (Schafer 1994, 15-16, pos. 308-321)

And indeed, the first sound you hear is the roar of the sea, whose waves are endlessly washed to the rugged coast of Naoshima. It is no coincidence that David Sylvian chose this sound for the beginning of his 70-minute work “When loud Weather buffeted Naoshima”, because you have to travel over the sea to get there. The Japanese island of Naoshima, which lies in Seto Inland Sea and belongs to Kagawa Prefecture, can only be reached by ferry. The smell of diesel and salt water, the sound of the sea and the blow of the wind accompany the crossing. In March 2018 I set foot on the island for the first time. The sea seems to be everywhere. It’s so loud at night, that it kept me from sleeping. The wind is pushing it constantly. At that moment I immediately understood why Sylvian chose this title for his piece.

As it is said on the homepage of David Sylvian “‘When loud weather buffeted Naoshima’ was commissioned by the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation on the island of Naoshima, Japan as part of the NAOSHIMA STANDARD 2 exhibition which ran from Oct 2006 to April 2007. The composition is site specific” (David Sylvian 2009). In a BBC Review Chris Jones wrote in 2007: “Conceived as a work in progress to be completed by the external sounds of the actual Chichu Art Gallery, When Loud Weather... is a collage of found sound, drones and contributions from a ensemble of big-hitters in the European avant fraternity including shakuhachi maestro, Clive Bell, guitarist Christian Fennesz and Norwegian trumpet/electronics genius, Arve Henriksen” (BBC-Music 2007). The composition consists of sounds recorded as field recordings on the island, drones (continuous or repetitive sounds) and sounds recorded in the studio by well-known musicians. The idea was to combine the recorded sounds with the sounds in situ. The listener should listen to the work via MP3 player while taking a walk through the Museum and across the island. As you can read on the homepage, “Sylvian has said that the work isn’t really complete until the sounds of the town Honmura are incorporated into the listening experience. For the samadhisound release of ‘when loud weather...’ Sylvian has, as already said, incorporated some of the sounds of the island into the final mix. Whilst this obviously doesn’t compare to the experience of listening to the work in situ it goes some way towards creating an echo of it.” (David Sylvian 2009) And further from the BBC review: “Moving between snatched conversation, tape hiss, meteorological ambience and the contributions of the above players, Sylvian hoped to create a ‘multiple exposure’ of the spiritual and emotional life of this ancient island where old and new exist cheek-by-jowl.” (BBC-Music 2007)

For the consideration of the piece it was important to me to familiarize myself with the atmosphere of the island – above all of course with the sound. With his work, Sylvian creates a piece of this atmosphere and uses formal strategies from musique concrète or even more from ambient music. “Ambient is a variant of electronic music in which spherical, soft, long and warm sounds dominate. Rhythm and percussion are in the background or are not present at all in ambient music, they appear as subtle percussion textures, as arpeggios or in rhythmically introduced melody and bass progressions.

Spatial effects, soundscapes and field recordings are often experimented with, and electronic organs (keyboards) and wind instruments are often used. Also natural soundscapes [...] have their place. The pieces of music are usually very slow and long, often build up slowly and merge into one another, rarely following a classical song structure". (Quoted/translated from Schwering 2018, 4) As described in this quotation, ambient music works with field recordings and the soundscapes found on location. Before I look in detail at Sylvian's piece, I would first like to define some important terms and describe some assumptions. Therefore, the terms soundscape, soundwalk, and location will be discussed in the following. I would like to use these terms to describe the sound and sensory world of the island of Naoshima, to explore how Sylvian's work reflects and meditates on it and to what extent the act of walking while listening enriches the exploration of the piece of music and the place.

### **Soundscape**

In the glossary to Schafer's Book *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1994) soundscape is described as "[t]he sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study. The term may refer to actual environment, or to abstract constructions such as musical [c]ompositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an environment." (Schafer 1994, pos. 5067) In their essay "Soundscape Ecology: The Science of Sound in the Landscape" Bryan Pijanowski et al define the term as "the relationship between a landscape and the composition of it's sound." (Pijanowski et al. 2011, 203) And further:

"[T]he first mention of soundscapes appears in urban planning literature. Nearly a decade later, Schafer (1977) recognized that sounds are ecological properties of landscapes, referring to soundscapes as 'the acoustical characteristics of an area that reflect natural processes.' His primary interest was in characterizing natural sounds that could be used to compose music. Krause (1987) later attempted to describe the complex arrangement of biological sounds and other ambient sounds occurring at a site,

and introduced the terms 'biophony' to describe the composition of sounds created by organisms and 'geophony' to describe nonbiological ambient sounds of wind, rain, thunder, and so on. We extend this taxonomy of sounds to include 'anthrophony' – those caused by humans. Soundscape ecology thus can be described by our working definition as all sounds, those of biophony, geophony, and anthrophony, emanating from a given landscape to create unique acoustical patterns across a variety of spatial and temporal scales." (Pijanowski et al. 2011, 204)

Soundscape should be understood as the sound of a landscape, in which the sounds are produced from different sources – climate, living beings, humans. Schafer points out that landscape and soundscape are by no means equally describable because a "soundscape consist of events *heard* not objects *seen*". (Schafer 1994, pos. 205) In contrast to landscapes that are visually perceived and from which one can take a photograph, soundscapes have to be heard. Hearing, however, is more difficult to limit and outline. The information it gives about space, though, is less clear than when seeing. (cf. Diaconu 2013, 70) In order to describe a soundscape, it is difficult to resort to the same terms as in the description of a visual impression. Schafer therefore suggests – in addition to the above-mentioned distinctions between the various sources of sounds – to describe soundscapes with the terms keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks.

Keynote sounds refer to the tonality, the anchor tone or the fundamental tone of the environment. "The keynote sounds of a given place are important because they help to outline the character of men living around them. The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, insects, animals." (Schafer 1994, pos. 240)

Signals are sounds and noises that can contain acoustic warnings, such as bells, whistles, horns or sirens. And a soundmark is similar to a landmark, that consists of "community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by people in this community." (Schafer 1994, pos. 255) Together, these different sounds form the certain soundscape of a certain environment that makes it definable and describable. "Acoustic cues

and signals are aural reminders and temporal nods to the rhythms of daily life; they help define an area spatially, temporally, socially and culturally." (Schine no year specified, 1)

### Soundwalk

Sound becomes an event in the case of a soundwalk. The location where it occurs is essential, because events are linked to a specific location. They "necessarily take place at one location or are bound to one location by persons. Thus time without space and space without time is inconceivable. Time inscribes itself into space in the form of traces and space exists only through time, since time is characterized by dimensions that can only be experienced through movement." (quoted / translated from Drohsel 2016, 131). So it is evident to move through space if you want to experience the soundscape of a place.

The science of walking deals with how a walker perceives a place by walking and thereby acquires knowledge about it. "Through the presence in a room and the physical movement in it, the senses are located in it and open up to perceptions that leave impressions. Memory is activated and complemented by a spiritual movement and personal experience" (quoted / translated from Drohsel 2016, 164).

In his book *Das Erbe des Flanierens. Der Souveneur – Ein handlungsbezogenes Konzept für urbane Erinnerungsdiskurse* (The Souveneur – A Concept for Action-Related Urban Discourses of Remembrance, 2016) Karsten Michael Drohsel asks, what exactly happens during action, when the action is walking. What does the walking mind perceive and what role does the body play in this? Therefore he refers to Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Above all Benjamin, according to Drohsel, had recognized the great potential of the Flanerie as a way of thinking. On his walks, he tried to save as much historical material about the city as possible, through the memory he encountered meanwhile. Strollers such as Benjamin and Baudelaire "were constantly on the lookout for traces and clues and followed them in order to discover their origin and meaning, to make the urban situations, spheres and spaces and thus the zeitgeist and the course of the world comprehensible to themselves." (quoted / translated from Drohsel 2016, 188)

Following Drohsel, it can be stated that walking in space enables the walker or stroller to communicate with the places visited and their objects and inhabitants and to uncover locally relevant discourses about them (see Drohsel 2016, 222).

You can do something very similar if you add hearing to attentive walking. According to Jennifer Schine, this walking and simultaneous listening, or soundwalking, is “an exploration of sound with the intent of active listening – hearing all environmental sounds while moving in and throughout the environment. It is a practice to re-remember sounds and re-learn how to hear. According to composer and sound ecologist, Hildegard Westerkamp, ‘it is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. Wherever we go, we give our ears priority...we need to stay in touch with our surroundings, as every sound carries very specific meanings no matter where we live’ (Westerkamp 1974). Soundwalks are also forms of autobiographical practice, revealing knowledge about both the self and the social consciousness and collective memory of place.”<sup>1</sup> (Schine no year specified, 4)

Soundwalking offers the possibility to understand the world through the ear. Thus, recording the sounds of the natural environment (ecoacoustics) offers an additional perspective that can provide new insights in addition to walking and hearing (cf. Barclay / Gifford 2018, 184). Hans U. Werner, for example, reports on his own experiences with soundwalking in Montevideo, in which he emphasizes the exploration of the inner rhythm of the city. (cf. Werner 2004, 84) All scientific and literary reports on Soundscape projects and soundwalking in Montevideo, Vancouver, Lisbon or Paris (among others) have in common that they deal with the specificity of the place or want to get to the bottom of this specificity via soundwalking. The nice thing about the example of Naoshima is that the place is very clearly marked out. It is a relatively small island that can be explored on foot in one to two days. Parts of the island can only be reached on foot or by bicycle, for example on weekends. If you limit yourself to the Benesse Art Site, a coastal route where most museums and exhibitions are located, and the city of Honmura in the east of the island, a 70-minute walk (as we remember, this is how long Sylvian’s piece is) is very well timed to get a comprehensive impression of the islands in situ sounds.

## Location

Since Sylvian's piece is not only a recording of a soundscape, but also a sound art, the following section will shed light on the concept of a place in relation to sound art, since aspects of this can be defined by the intensity of its connection to a room or place. (cf. Kiefer 2010, 35) Peter Kiefer differentiates the local reference in sound art depending on how close or far art is to the location and to what extent it interacts with the location. Two categories are interesting for "When loud Weather buffeted Naoshima":

- 1 Sound art as interaction with and in the room. Here the moving body of a visitor interacts with the sounds or sound movements of the installation (cf. Kiefer 2010, 37).
- 2 Sound art installation 'genius loci', 'in situ'. Kiefer describes this as sound art, which explores the conditions found in a unique place and thus only makes sense in this place. This is the case, for example, when art refers to specific acoustic conditions of the place or incorporates them (cf. Kiefer 2010, 37).

On the one hand, because the listener hears the piece through headphones and can move freely through the room, the first category is relevant insofar as the listener can interact with the sounds. On the other hand, the specific location is decisive when it comes to the full sound experience, so that the second category fits even more. Maybe it is a mixture of both that we have to deal with, in this case. As Sylvian himself said is, that the piece is only complete when it combines with the in situ sounds of the island. In an essay dealing with the place, situation and event of sound art, it is aptly noted that the listener is confronted with the place, has to deal with it and his own perception (cf. Barthelmes 2010, 161-162). In addition, it is pointed out that during the interaction and reflection of the spatial situation, the listener must also deal with unforeseeable criteria such as weather, climate, traffic and the general variability and transience of the place (cf. Barthelmes 2010, 163). Further to the sound elements recorded in the studio by musicians, Sylvian's work already deals with the sounds that nature (and culture) produces. A confrontation with less to hardly calculable noises is therefore part of the play.

## The Soundscape of Naoshima

The leading in situ sounds heard in 'When loud Weather...' are the noise of wind and water and the jingle of a wind chime. The sound of waves that are washed on the beach is soft at first, but then it becomes louder, mixed with the whistling of the wind. A strong wind. Rattle. Then the wind chime. Or is it not a wind chime? Is this a studio sound? I can't say for sure, but I saw such wind chimes of shells, sticks and small bells on Naoshima in woodlands and at temples on clearings high above the asphalted roads. At the same time there are sounds from flutes and wire brushes. Also high notes and singing. The flute you hear is very probably a shakuhachi, a Japanese wooden long flute. One of the musicians involved, Clive Bell, is known for his Shakuhachi playing.

You can hear the chirping of birds alongside electronic sounds. Dull piercing tones, indescribable tones... The reverb of the sounding body of an acoustic guitar. Low notes of a trumpet or horns. Quiet clattering of engines. Scratching on an underground. Sound fragments. And again and again the wind and the wind chime.

As I write this text, I remember the sounds of Naoshima. My own recordings consist mainly of wind and water. Plus the crunching of the sand or the sound my shoes make on the asphalt. And also the sound of passing cars. At least in the places where they are permitted.

Naoshima is an interesting place, which on the one hand seems natural and pristine. Almost rough, due to the very loud weather and the rocky coast. On the other hand, there is so much art on the island, which in its manner or the way it is exhibited, seems to stand in sharp contrast to the naturalness of the place.

If you're not on Naoshima, what you hear when you listen to 'When loud Weather...' is actually a kind of echo, as Chris Jones calls it. The piece works perfectly as an ambient track on its own, because it produces something like the spirit of the soundscape by embedding the in situ sounds – an echo – the reverberation of the actual sound, only a little less in its strength.

But when you hear the song on the island, the sounds of the soundscape add up. They may even multiply. The world of sound, which the piece develops, is penetrated by its own source. The field recordings contained in the piece and the in situ sounds, which the listener perceives while walking, connect; refer to each other and to

the soundscape of the island. It is both a concept and a necessity to move around the island as an active listener in order to trace the sounds. The piece is intended to entice the listener to track down the exact source of individual sounds, to move in Sylvian's footsteps and to explore the signals and soundmarks by walking and thus to be able to experience the island more deeply. The recording takes up the already visible contrasts of the island. The field of tension between modernity and tradition is reflected in the selection of musical instruments by combining the sounds of traditional Japanese instruments, such as the shakuhachi, with electronic sounds.

The flaneur not only wanders through Sylvian's work, but also reveals a central aspect of the island, whose concept is to contrast the tension between nature and art and architecture without one surpassing the other. Because many works can be entered and thus can be perceived sensually, the contrast between nature and art is eliminated and therefore becomes a space of experience/sensescape of its own. Sylvian must have recognized this concept, because his work is directly connected to it, taking up the ideas of the Benesse Art Site, creating a piece that was made for this place, that interacts with it and also functions detached from it. A work that drives the ear to discover the soundscape and its associated memories and that makes the walker not only feel the island more clearly on his walk, but also exposes him to a cut through time when he listens to sounds from 2006 and possibly 2018 at the same time.

As these considerations should make clear, "When loud Weather..." – by linking the areas of walking, listening and sound recording with regard to the specific location – not only represents an atmospheric artistic interaction with Naoshima, but also offers the possibility of an aesthetic-theoretical examination of the ecological and cultural environment of the island and the situatedness of the walking person in it. Walking is after all not only walking, but always a positioning at a certain place at a certain time and thus a certain sensescape.

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**Notes**

- 1 Schine quotes: Westerkamp, Hildegart. 1974. Soundwalking. *Sound Heritage*, III/4, 18-27