

The
Music of
Sound
Guy Trebay
on Bill
Fontana
(P. 59)

the village

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VOICE CENTERFOLD

The Music of Sound

By Guy Trebay

That sound. A throaty hum, a thrum, in the plaza of the World Trade Center. It's eerie, first low in pitch, and constant, then whining and low again. Sometimes, there are several sounds mixed together, as resonant as a mantra, only diffuse. They come from somewhere in the building facade, up there in the struts. But what is it?

It's an artwork, made by Bill Fontana, for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, as I discovered on Wednesday.

Fontana is standing on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, at the base of the promenade stair.

Leaning over the iron rail, he points to a walkway just out of view. Cars shoot by, their tires making a searing sound in the asphalt, which is gummy and gives off heat in waves. Down a hatch is a catwalk, and on the catwalk at regular intervals, microphones are rigged, each one tuned to the oscillating roadbed of the bridge. At the foot of the catwalk is a transmitter, and from it through telephone wires, the Brooklyn Bridge talks to the west side of Manhattan.

"It's best in the early evening," Fontana tells me, "there's less traffic on the bridge and the cars that are on it go faster. That creates greater variation in pitch."

Fontana is soft spoken. He's got melancholy eyes that turn down at the corners and long Buddha ears. He's always "collected" sound on tape recordings. He's interested in the music of the commonplace. Sitting in the City Hall park, beneath a statue of Horace Greeley, the

Californian slips his headphones over my ears.

"This is one I made for the Sierra Club, this sound. It's part of a record they're going to bring out in the fall."

The trill, cluck, and percolating coo are mating sounds of the wild sage grouse at Mammoth Lake, California. "We—an ornithologist and I—camped in a park where they live, got up at four in the morning and went looking for birds."

At other times, he has recorded, on eight channels, an Adirondack woodpecker, freight trains whistling at an Emeryville, California rail crossing, the first tree frogs of spring, the fog horns of San Francisco Bay.

He plays the fog horns for me. Their low sonorous soundings come in sequence, overlapping each other to make a music that goes to the base of your spine, even further. They're hah. They make you think of sex.

"I take sound away from its context," says Fontana. "The bridge in the World Trade Center plaza, or the train whistles, which were transmitted to a lakeside setting, where there weren't any trains at all."

The foghorns sound in sequence from Point Blunt, Mile Rocks, Point Bonita, Alcatraz Island and the piers of Golden Gate Bridge. They surfaced at Fort Mason, not far from Telegraph Hill. "I use sound recording," says Fontana, "as a way of investigating musical form."

In the 1970s Fontana, who was trained as a composer, got a job from the government of Australia. Travel around the continent, they told him, recording Australian sounds. What does that mean?

"Birds in the rain forest, street sounds, a small café in the outback. It was my dream job." Fontana uses a variety of techniques to make his recordings but when he wants to snare a sound unnoticed, he wears a microphone that disguises itself as a headset.

"It's unobtrusive," he says. "You can

get close to people with it and they think you're wearing a Walkman."

He offers the microphone and I try it on. A bum foraging peaceably in a nearby trash can is transformed into a sonic monster, pawing through a crackling heap of fast food rubbish, clinking against the metal mesh, grunting and panting over a bass line of ambient traffic roar.

"The brain," says Fontana, "is very discriminating. It filters a lot of sound it doesn't want to hear. But the microphone registers everything equally, at the same pitch."

Beginning in September, for a year, Fontana will broadcast a single sound four minutes each day, on WNYC. Included will be the sound of honey eaters in a field, the Genesee River drawbridge, pile drivers on a San Francisco street—you can probably skip that one—and what he calls the strange sounds he hears when he's away from home ("Noises I have trouble tuning out, that leave me no choice but to get up and record them."). He will also play the quietest moment he's ever known. It was in Australia, at the heart of a tropical rain forest. All the animals and birds were screaming, a primal din in the moments before an eclipse of the sun.

"The sound was tremendous."

As the moon orbited to block out the sun, all sound in the forest abruptly ceased, as if a hole had opened in the earth and all the noise fell in.

"It was beautiful," he says, "but scary."

We're walking on lower Broadway, at rush hour. He hands me a packet with press clips inside that review his work, and copies of his proposals. One is in Italian: *Sonorita Prospettiche*—the words have a musical sound. In another a reviewer writes: "Fontana displaces ambience by using his recorded sounds outside their setting... his tapes stimulate visualizations beyond our normal sense reactions."

"Off the coast of San Francisco," says

Fontana, "is a small chain of uninhabited islands—the Farallons. For the 50th anniversary of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I'm going to place microphones at 12 strategic locations there to transmit the sounds of some of the 250,000 birds and 2000 marine mammals that live or pass through there."

Four microphones will be stationed at high elevations, four at the waters edge. Four hydrophones will be placed under water to hear the sound of the whales.

"Do you really think that you will hear them?"

"Oh absolutely," says Fontana, "it's right on their migrating route."

In the plaza of the World Trade Center, water slides off the smooth edge of a polished granite fountain. The overlapping wavelets make a whooshing sound. A quirky wind has blown in from the river. Whipping around the plaza, it picks up trash and Coke cans, flaps at women's skirts.

"Sounds, like three dimensional things we can walk around, occupy space," Fontana has written. "If we walk around something with our eyes open, we are clearly aware of the changing lines of demarcation, indicating where things and bodies begin and end. As we walk around something that is sounded with our eyes closed, we may experience the peculiar sense of carrying the sound with us."

Fontana takes his leave and I find a seat in a cool spot by the fountain. Cans clatter and a helicopter flies overhead, its rotor thumping. Leaves chatter in wind eddies. Behind and beneath these sounds is the Brooklyn Bridge's oscillating roadway. It's not the voice in which I imagine the bridge would speak. Focusing on the sound, it occurs to me that maybe the bridge has a number of voices, of which this big hum is one. Perhaps someday, Fontana might move his microphones higher, up the catwalks to the steel suspension cables. Surely the wind and the wires must have something to say.