The Music of Sound

By Guy Trebay

California slips his headphones over my ears. "This is one I made for the Sierra Club, this sound is part of a record they're going to bring out in the fall." The trill, click, and percolating coo are mating sounds of the wild sage grouse at Mammoth Lake, California. "We're an orthobiologist 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 Emersonville, California railroad crossing, the first true frogs of spring, the fog horns of San Francisco Bay.

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

"I take sound away from its context," says Fontana. The bridge in the World Center plaza, or the train whistle, which were transmitted to a lakeside setting, where there were no trains at all.

The gopher sound in sequences from Point Bluff, Mile Rocks, Point Bonita, Alcatraz Island and the pier 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 1960s 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 cafe in the outskirts. It was my dream job." Fontana uses a variety of techniques to make his recordings but when he wants to create a sound untold, he wears a microphone that distinguishes itself as a headset.

"It's uncomfortable," he says, "You can get close to people with it and they think you're eavesdropping on their walking." He offers the microphone and I try it on. A bum foraging peacefully in a nearby trash can is transformed into a sonic monster, pawing through a cracking heap of fast food rubbish, clacking 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 drawer, pipe 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 turning out, that leave me no choice but to get up and record them."). He will also play the quietest moment he's ever heard, it was in Australia, at the heart of a tropical rain forest. All the animals and birds were screaming, a primal din in the moment before an eclipse of the sun.

"The sound was tremendous."

As the moon orbited to block out the sun, all sound in the forest were chased away, as if a hole had opened in the atmosphere and all the noise fell in.

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

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 Proposito — the words have a musical sound in another reviewer's writing. Fontana dispenses ambience by creating sounds outside their setting... his tapes stimulate visualizations beyond our normal sense reactions.

"On the coast of San Francisco," says Fontana, "is a small chain of uninhabited islands, the Farallon. For the 50th anniversary of the Farallon, I'm going to place microphones at 12 strategic locations there to transmit the sounds of some of the 200,000 birds and 200 marine mammals that live or pass through there."

The four microphones will be stationed at high elevations, four at the waters edge. Four hydrophones will be placed underwater 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 sounds make a shimmering sound. A buoyant wind has blown in from the river. Whipping around the plaza, it takes trash and Coke cans, flaps at women's skirts.

"Sounds, like emotional 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 leaves and I find a seat in a cool spot by the fountain, cans clutter and a bicycle flies overhead, its rotor clumping. Leaves chatter in wind eddies. Behind and beneath these sounds is the Brooklyn Bridge's oscillating roadway. It's not the voice 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's microphones could make the bridge sing higher, up the cations to the steel suspension cables. Surely the wind and the waves must have something to say."

"Would you like to hear the world as if you were eavesdropping on a Walkman?"

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