

# )))((( BINAURAL

## Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview  
with Marc Behrens

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**MARK BEHRENS** is a sound artist working in performance, installation, audio and video. He has performed extensively across Europe, Japan, Middle East and North America. He is known for creating delicate work using building interiors, processed field recordings and manipulated objects.

Selected Discography:

Advanced Environmental Control [trente oiseaux]  
Four Installations [trente oiseaux]  
Further Consequences, with Paulo Raposo [cronica]  
A Szellem Alma, with Francisco Lopez [absolute]

**Mark McLaren (MM):** How do you think composing with and listening to field recordings affects the non linguistic and non narrative nature of instrumental music?

**Marc Behrens (MB):** From my point of view, I do not call music composed with field recordings instrumental music. It is concrete music. Whether or not it does have a narrative structure is subject to the composer's decision. There are examples of both. Most Musique Concrète is highly narrative, and often it contains (in its later phase, also very much pursued by the Canadian school) linguistic (i.e. speech) elements.

On the other hand, working with field recordings can, in some cases, lead to a music arranged not so much with a destination in time, but rather in the form of a 'plateau' of time. Here, the sound material is similar, or, say of similar intensity, in many points within the composition - just like a given field recording itself.

Field recordings may be not linguistic, but they are pre-linguistic, since they contain information about the sonic aspects of a place that is not encoded into language, nevertheless audibly understandable for those not present at the moment of the actual recording. The composer who uses these field recordings works with them in his own way, based on his own language -however rudimentary it might be-, thus on a meta-level linguistic structures are involved. But also something else comes into effect, working with field recordings: as the recordist /composer is in the grasp of the moment of the actual recorded sound, and whatever happens in this moment, and he later reminds this when re-listening to the recording, the situation and sound may put their own structure upon his imagination and invoke feelings that lead to certain decisions within the composition. It can go so far as that structures within field recordings are already 'auto-composed', not language-based at all, but they gain linguistic sense depending on the imagination and associative capabilities of the listener.



**MM:** One of the reasons for these interviews is to see if there is an 'grammar of composition' emerging from different practitioners. Have you evolved any compositional rules or do you solely work on intuition?

**MB:** I would rather call them 'methods', when referring to the general atmosphere of a piece, or 'library of forms' (plus, in fact, 'grammar'), when referring to microstructures and single events in the composition. Unfortunately this library and grammar so far exists solely in my mind. I should really make an attempt to write them down, which is not a quickly done project I guess. In short I can say that I favour a rather fragmented approach over the 'drone' approach, that lets me rework the original recordings not only into something that sounds different in terms of pitch, timbre, frequency spectrum, but also into something more atomic, like single strokes on an instrument for example. In this way, I am more or less returning to instrumental music. I have understood that I have a preference for certain volume curves over others when I shape sounds. Some of these forms are returning often in several different compositions - they do have to correspond to my 'tests'. These tests check proportions (time/volume) as well as dynamics in a piece.

I usually start with the shaping of the basic sound material (field recordings, recordings of played objects), from there I develop a general idea about the overall structure and dynamics of a piece. Then the meticulous putting into action of that mental library starts.

There is something like a 'typical' sound, which stems largely from the methods, i.e. the way I rework field recordings. This, I mean the shaping of samples made from the field recordings, has been compared with building one's own instruments. But in fact it is the first instance of the composition itself, especially when you work with cues coming from the original material.

**MM:** So it seems as if there are almost two levels of composition becoming apparent: Firstly the proto-composition of editing and playing an environment whilst recording; Secondly the composition which takes places after the 'raw material' is returned to the studio. Would you like to talk about the similarities between improvising in performance / composition and improvising during making field recordings, this seems an unexplored area of creativity?

**MB:** To this question I see two possible answers, the first one being very simple: if improvisation during field recording sessions is used to create sonic basic material for composition or to influence a given sonic event, then it is not relevant if it was improvisation, since later the material is composed with non-improvisational rules. At least I am able to say that for my own compositions. And this renders that kind of improvisation completely different from 'classical' improvisation.

The second answer is maybe more complex: I didn't regard the element of 'improvisation' during field recording as being at all important or crucial to the composition processes, I must admit. Interesting that you would mention it. I do make a rough distinction between field recordings as such, and played objects. But of course, if you 'direct' a field recording in a specific way, by trying out to play some objects within reach for example, you could call that improvisation. The question is, if the results from these actions remain untouched and presented as a block later (in which the improv element is clear) or if you deconstruct them and work with them in ways we have described earlier in this interview (more towards reflected composition). I do recall one of the rare cases in which I used a long 'uncensored' passage from a recording in a train station that was done with piezos on a baggage cart (so you



actually hear the cart and its handle much louder than any background noise). It is on my CD Elapsed Time (I believe track 3). The cart sounds rather like a performance, a performed cart. In the other case, the fact it being improvised or not is still quite irrelevant for the 'final product'.

As you mentioned, the similarities are clear, but I must say that improvisation in these cases follows exclusively the approach of the experiment, which makes it in my humble opinion unequal to instrumental improvisation since the latter is always counting on the musician's mastery of the instrument. Let's stick to improvisation-while-field-recording since improvisation while performing still is 'instrumental' in a way. During field recording one tries to influence a given soundscape and quite typically relies on post-production sound design, so one tends to do many takes and later edit them instead of really 'playing' a continuous block (again - this is just my approach). I should mention that I increasingly got frustrated with this approach, or rather with the fact that I got so influenced by the non-simultaneity of thinking in the age of computer-manipulated concrete sound. So remembering this, the field recording process - when using improvisation - is a process of experiments that help to generate the vision of a music piece.

What just now comes to my mind is also the fact that instrumental improvisation (whatever the instrument is like - including computers) in a group always has linguistic aspects. Maybe we should come back to that that later, if we return to that point.