

## The Mexican Soundscape Project

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### Introduction: Soundscapes, Cultural Landscapes

In 1992, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee adopted the concept of “cultural landscapes” to give special recognition to particular places “created, formed and preserved by the ties and interactions between man and his environment.”

If we borrow this concept to reflect on the world of sound, it is clear that the contemporary soundscape is a product of the interaction between the sounds of nature and the sounds produced by humankind, leading to the conclusion that soundscapes can merit cultural heritage status.

The interaction between the sounds of a specific environment and the people who carry out activities there may be singular enough to hold forms of cultural identity and differentiate between cultures in the acoustic dimension.

We tend to characterize a place by the architecture of its buildings, by its customs, by the flavors of its foods; but at the same time we pay little attention to the unconscious impressions made on us by the sounds heard there.

The peal of bells that wakes up the inhabitants, the cries of vendors as they hawk their products, the muted thundering of nearby waterfalls, the noise and bustle of the market; all these may be parts of the distinctive soundscape that make up the acoustic identity of a place and characterize it to locals and visitors alike.<sup>19</sup>

From this perspective, the sounds of a region have heritage value thanks to their ability to invoke a function of specific social identity. A people recognizes and distinguishes itself by the cultural expressions by which it lives and which set it apart; whether these are a traditional food, a village square, or a regional dance. Each of these elements contributes a small part to the sum of the cultural and social identity of a people.

In the same way, society and the natural world surrounding it (that is, the ecosystem as a whole) are expressed through sounds and the way they are produced; by the particular rhythms and cadences that paint acoustic tapestries in the peculiar landscapes of every particular sociocultural system.

It is vital, then, that we become truly aware of the existence of these sounds and, to the extent possible, take action to care for, value and preserve them.

I would now like to share something of our experience at the Fonoteca, the National Sound Archive of Mexico with a project we have undertaken which is related to two particular objectives;

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<sup>19</sup> Some of the elements of a soundscape can be emblems of recognition for a place. Murray Schafer termed these “soundmarks”; see Schafer, R. Murray, *The Tuning of the World*.

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1) to increase appreciation of our heritage acoustic environment, this being understood as “cultural landscapes,” and 2) give priority to an auditory analysis that will raise our awareness of the changes taking place in our environment by encouraging us to truly listen to the sounds around us.

### **The Soundscape of Mexico project**

We have developed a project called the Soundscape of Mexico.

A direct forerunner of this undertaking can be identified in the work begun in the 1970s at Simon Fraser University in Canada by Murray Schafer, Hildegard Westerkamp and Barry Truax. Their innovative studies examined soundscapes in different places using field recordings which were then analyzed in great detail. Their projects also gave rise to Schafer’s World Soundscape Project (WSP) which set the standard for soundscape research and artistic creation.<sup>20</sup>

Here we should perhaps take a moment to make it clear that from the first moment of the emergence of the soundscape concept, work designated by this term has developed in two parallel, sometimes simultaneous ways; namely research and composition.

Field recordings have enabled the acoustic characteristics of an environment to be studied, but at the same time these recordings have also served as raw material for experiment and composition, yielding acoustic works composed by artists, musicians and audio designers. This has often given rise to a certain confusion, as the term Soundscape is applied to two different entities. Perhaps the distinction proposed by Barry Truax himself should be restored. He differentiated between Soundscape Ecology, the relationships between humans and their acoustic environments; and Soundscape Design, the name he gave to the creation or reproduction and the modeling of acoustic environments through the process of sound composition.

In Mexico, we began to promote the creation of soundscapes in 2004, when I was the head Radio Educación. With support from the German broadcasters Radio Berlin Brandenburg and Deutschland Radio, we inaugurated the project “Soundscapes of Mexico.” Our aim was to create sound compositions by recording the most characteristic sounds of different regions of Mexico using modern audio techniques and technology.

We have been able to continue the project at the National Sound Archives, incorporating the goals of preserving and organizing Mexico’s sound heritage.

The purpose of the Soundscape of Mexico project is to preserve, document and maintain the vast wealth and diversity of the acoustic expressions of our country for present and future generations. In concrete terms, the project involves exploring each of Mexico’s 31 states to collect and capture, using professional recording technology, the most significant acoustic expressions making up the characteristic soundscape of each state.

A group of artists, sound engineers and sound designers are making the recordings and using them to create compositions that reflect the soundscapes of each respective Mexican state.

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<sup>20</sup> For more information about the origins of the Soundscape concept, see Barry Truax, *Soundscape, Acoustic Communication and Environmental Sound Composition*. Contemporary Music Review Vol. 15, Part. 1. London: Hardwood.



But Soundscapes of Mexico is more than just a springboard for a dedicated effort to collect sounds and order them by an esthetic logic. It is also an opportunity to form a significant collection of sound documents that will be catalogued and classified, and entered into the National Sound Archives collection, thereby enriching and extending the Acoustic Heritage of Mexico and the opportunity to let its sounds be heard.

“Soundscape” is, in fact, one of the classifications within our archive, alongside “voice,” “music” and “radio.” These field recordings of the Mexican soundscape are unique, one-off documents which are deposited in the sound archives after going through the cataloguing process.

### **CATALOGUE RECORD**

The motivation behind the creation of a Soundscape is to enable the most significant sounds of each state to be identified. To do so, we must learn about the traditional music of a place, its community celebrations and festivals, its indigenous languages, the expressions and idioms used by its people, and the trades they exercise, its natural environments; in short all the acoustic elements that will help us to discover what sounds represent its identity.

To date, after rigorous research, field recording and post-production work, the soundscapes of five Mexican states have been rendered; Chiapas, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, the Federal District and Veracruz.

Recording, documenting and preserving the Soundscape of Mexico is an important challenge, but at the same time a splendid opportunity to conserve an invaluable part of our acoustic identity.