

# The Absent Listener - Composing from Continuous Soundscape Recordings

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## ABSTRACT

*The Absent Listener is a series of pieces derived exclusively from continuous soundscape recordings made at the author's home in Northern Ontario, Canada.*

*The recordings are made continuously and unsupervised. The recording process is done in this way so that the presence of the recordist has as little influence as possible on the behaviour of people, animals and insects while the recordings are taking place.*

*Pieces made in the series are discussed. They include two long form soundscape works for fixed media, an online installation that generates fixed media compositions according to listener specifications, and a new fixed media composition that compresses down recordings made over an entire year at the project location.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Absent Listener is a series of pieces derived exclusively from a collection of continuous soundscape recordings made at the author's rural home [1].

The continuous recordings are made without any on-site presence of the recordist, save for short visits for equipment adjustments and battery or SD-card changes. The recording process is done in this way so that the presence of the recordist (also the author) has as little influence as possible on the behaviour of people, animals and insects, audible while the recordings take place.

The project has led to various fixed media soundscape works which will be discussed in this presentation. These pieces and the recording process itself are motivated by an interest in sharing a sense of the natural ebb and flow of weather events at the location as well as the extreme proximity range of sounds audible in the environment. These aspects of the soundscape that are experienced by the author on a daily basis, have influenced the direction of his fixed media compositions. In the past five years his pieces have all been made without the use of electroacoustic transformations and have been composed entirely from soundscape recordings made outdoors on his property.

## 2. LOCATION

The recordings are made outdoors on a 14-acre rural property in Lount, an unincorporated township in Parry Sound District, which is approximately 40 km west of Algonquin Park. The location has mixed forests, is close to a lake, and a creek, and has a mixture of rocky and swampy terrain. It is also 20 KM from a highway. This distance limits the road noise audible in the soundscape to only local traffic. The absence of highway noise contributes to the sense of spatial distance audible in the recordings made at the location.

Although all of the recordings take place within the author's 14-acre property, there are three other adjacent properties of similar size with residents and short-term rental guests. The presence of people from these properties are audible in the recordings, particularly in the summer time. Typically, recordings are made in forested areas of the property in order to diminish the immediate presence of people, and to secure more protection from wind and rain. At certain times those forest locations bring into the foreground of the recordings the low thumping of a roughed grouse, the springtime activity of birds as well as the calls of loons and wolves in the distance.

## 3. TECHNICAL SETUP

The recordings are made on a Sound Devices Mix-Pre-6 with a matched pair of DPA 4060 Lavalier omni-directional microphones mounted in a boundary configuration on either side of an 18" square sheet of 1/4" plywood.<sup>1</sup> For example: see Figure 1. The plywood is attached to trees, buildings or mic stands using clamps. This boundary style configuration of stereo recording is used so the content translates for listening over both loudspeakers and headphones.

The four microphone input channels on the Mix-Pre-6 allows for audio to be captured from Hydrophones and Geophones and synchronized with the boundary stereo microphones. This means that sound transmitted through air, water and the earth can all be heard simultaneously. This part of the recording process is a more recent edition to the project, so only the author's current piece in the Absent Listener series uses these 4-channel recordings.

<sup>1</sup> The recording system is powered by a Go Labs LiFePO4 battery which is stored with the recorder inside a marine battery box. Recordings are

named with reference to their location, date/time of recording and the type of microphone configuration.



Figure 1. Right side of boundary-style stereo microphone setup with plywood board clamped to a microphone stand.

## 4. ARTISTIC WORKS

There are currently five artistic works completed as part of The Absent Listener project.

### 4.1. Open Microphone Live Streaming

The first public outcome of the recording project happened between February and May 2019. The format at that time included recording but its focus was on open microphone soundscape livestreaming for the Locusonus network of open microphones.<sup>2</sup> The recording locations used at that time were chosen for their access to WIFI and initially to electrical power. After a few months it became more appealing to avoid livestreaming in order to focus instead on smaller mobile setups that could run on a battery. This provided more variety of sound environments to explore and minimized the presence of the sounds from the author's household. The livestream setup since that time has been repeated for the first weekend of May each year in order to contribute to the Reveil broadcast of world-wide daybreak soundscapes coordinated by Sound Camp and the Acoustic Commons Network.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.2. February 2019 - Long Form Fixed Media

In December 2019, the first long form fixed media soundscape piece in "The Absent Listener" series was made with the goal of faithfulness to the natural flow of wind and weather. This 45-minute piece is based on recordings made with the livestreaming system in February 2019.<sup>4</sup> The long-duration structure is shaped by the unfolding of wind, rain and snow. This piece was inspired by other long form

soundscape works, such as radio art productions in the latter decades of the 20th Century from WDR, ABC Listening Room and Kunstradio as well as by artists such as Chris Watson, Jana Winderen and Francisco Lopez [2]-[6].

In February of 2019, this landscape lacked the sounds of human presence. The sounds heard consisted mostly of wind passing through pine, birch and cedar trees located approximately 1000 feet uphill from the shore of a small lake. The 30°C shifts in winter temperatures that happened during that month appear in the recording as sounds like snow, sleet and rain, as well as the cracking sounds from trees and built structures.

The structure of the piece follows the chronological order of the recordings. Often, four or more recordings made in the same hour are layered. In a concert presentation, these layers were distributed spatially using a Polhemus 6D sensor controller connected to a customized Max patch [7].<sup>5</sup>

### 4.3. March 2020 - Long Form Fixed Media

The second piece in the Absent Listener series is a 60-minute stereo piece composed for home listening.<sup>6</sup> The piece is derived from a continuous soundscape recording made between March 16 and 18, 2020. The difference between this piece and the previous one was not marked by the lockdowns, but rather by making the recording setup portable (abandoning livestreaming) and locating it at the shoreline of the lake.<sup>7</sup>

The sound of the ice on the lake shifting and changing is an attractive feature of this piece, as is the physical activity of pileated woodpeckers and red squirrels happening close to the microphone location. Recording continuously and without constant supervision afforded a greater range of these types of sounds than would be possible if they were recorded at the convenience of the author's personal schedule. Also, the absence of a human at the recording site may have allowed for close exploration of the microphones by woodpeckers and squirrels heard in the recordings.

This piece also contains very few instances where multiple recordings are layered over each other than what has occurred in the author's previous pieces. This prompted the author to push his approach to long form composition closer to phonography, as represented on the Framework radio program and Claude Schryer's *simplesoundscapes* series, but also to consider earlier historical examples like Luc Ferrari's *Presque rien* series or the World Soundscape Project's *Summer Solstice* radio program [8]-[10].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Locus Sonus project at École Supérieur d'Art d'Aix in France provides server access and a host website for open microphone livestreams that can be experienced at <http://locusonus.org/soundmap/051/>

<sup>3</sup> Reveil is a 24-hour live radio programme of daybreak soundscapes livestreamed by contributors located around the world and is coordinated by Sound Camp and Acoustic Commons network. <http://soundtent.org/soundcampabout.html>

<sup>4</sup> Available on the author's Soundcloud page - <https://soundcloud.com/darren-copeland/absent-listener-february-2019>

<sup>5</sup> The February 2019 version was premiered at a winter solstice performance in December 2019 at the Dispersion Lab, York University in To-

ronto. The spatialization system used for the performance was made collaboratively with Benjamin Thigpen in 2008 for concert presentations by New Adventures in Sound Art.

<sup>6</sup> Available on the author's Soundcloud page - <https://soundcloud.com/darren-copeland/absent-listener-march-2020>

<sup>7</sup> The outset of the COVID-19 lockdowns did not have a noticeable auditory impact in this region like they did in many urban centres. The impact happened a year into the pandemic after people moved to the region from cities.

<sup>8</sup> *Summer Solstice* was a radio episode made from 24 hourly recordings condensed into one hour. This was one of ten episodes in the series called *Soundscapes of Canada* that was produced in 1974 by the World Soundscape Project for the CBC *Ideas* program.

#### 4.4. May 2021 - Online User-generated Fixed Media

A current development in *The Absent Listener* series is an online audio installation that started over a year ago.<sup>9</sup> In this version web visitors select from four parameters - date range, period of day, overall duration and rate of change - in order to generate an automated composition based on these parameter selections. [11] Real-time interaction is avoided so that once the choices are made, the focus for the web visitor is on listening. Currently, the author is working on expanding the online user-generated version to create more compositional parameters. The listener's influence over structure allows for the piece to vary between musical chance composition and precise acoustic study of a specific time and place depending on how wide or narrow the parameters that are inputted by the web visitor.

The web installation uses recordings that are only from the spring months, which offers an extreme range of listening experiences. In March and April there is the quiet subtlety of below-zero Celsius conditions accented by short loud events (ice and trees cracking) that evolve into blustery windy conditions. After the temperature warms in the later part of the season, this gives way to a gradual increase in density of the sounds of birds, frogs and peepers.

#### 4.5. March-April 2023 - Current Piece

Currently the author has completed the fixed media soundscape piece *Absent Near Dawn*, which adopts a different way of organizing content from the recording collection.<sup>10</sup> It follows a chronological sequence of dawn recordings between December 2021 and June 2022. This structure provides an interesting balance between variety and continuity as it contains recordings from multiple locations around the 14-acre property that are made during different seasons. Dawn in the winter time often has very infrequent animal vocalizations, while by comparison, dawn during the spring is extremely dense with vocalizations. These points of contrast are balanced by the fact that the location and several animal species remain the same in all of the recordings.

The initial goal of the piece was to condense a year's worth of recordings into a more accessible 15-minute duration. However, in working with the material it was found that a longer duration allowed for events to unfold more naturally. In the final outcome a 30-minute piece using dawn recordings from a six-month period was produced.<sup>11</sup>

### 5. CONCLUSION

The underlying goal for all of these pieces is to remain faithful to the natural unfolding of sounds happening on this single 14-acre property. The mixture of this continuous practice with the author's daily experiences living on the property shapes the identity of *The Absent Listener* project. Daily observations of wind, temperature and precipitation and how they impact the soundscape of the property on a

day-to-day basis determines where the recording equipment is to be located, which precautions need to be taken for their survival and which directions the microphone should face. These decisions in turn determine the material that is captured on the recordings and which form the basis of all of the compositions made for *The Absent Listener* project.

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<sup>9</sup> The Absent Listener was premiered at the Re: Flux Festival in Moncton, New Brunswick in May 2021 and it can be experienced at <https://www.darrencopeland.net/TheAbsentListener/> as well as among the on-site installations for WFAE *Listening Pasts - Listening Futures* conference in New Smyrna Beach, FL, USA.

<sup>10</sup> Available on the author's Soundcloud page - <https://soundcloud.com/darren-copeland/absent-near-dawn>

<sup>11</sup> A 30-minute version of the piece premiered at the EarSoundScope series in Copenhagen and Malmö in April 2023.