

RESEARCH ESSAY

Composing With the Surroundings: Environmental Sound as Musical Material

Jaana Ross^{1,*}

¹Department of Musicology, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Correspondence: jaana.ross@ut.ee

Environmental sound enters composition with a history already attached to it. A river recording bears weather, access, microphone choice, land use, and the composer's determination about where listening should begin and end. What changes when surroundings are treated as musical material rather than background or raw resource? Composing with environmental sound is ethically persuasive when transformation retains audible and documented relations to place. The apparent object is only the entrance to the problem. Following recording location, duration, permissions, acoustic perspective, processing chains, environmental change, and community understanding shifts account toward the interdependence between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments and away from claims based on appearance alone.

A work built from harbor recordings stretches engine drones into harmony. Port labor remains sonically present, yet workers are absent from the program note, allowing an industrial soundscape to become atmospheric texture without social context. Several readings remain possible, yet they are not equally supported. The case gives priority to the explanation that accounts for its case-bound sequence and material limits. It thus turns the dynamic between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments into a bounded proposition, one connected to this situation rather than elevated prematurely into a universal rule.

Authority is distributed unevenly across the scene. Some actors can define the vocabulary, others can alter form, and still others appear mainly through impacts recorded in recording location, duration, permissions, acoustic perspective, processing chains, environmental change, and community construction. The account of the alignment between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source en-

vironments must keep those powers distinct. Its boundary is whether listeners can encounter compositional invention without the place being reduced to anonymous material, which stops visibility from being mistaken automatically for influence.

A community project records a seasonal wetland from fixed listening points selected with local ecologists. The composition preserves interruptions and species uncertainty, refusing a seamless portrait of nature. This case reverses the earlier balance between visibility and control. What becomes easier to see may become harder to govern, and what appears collective may depend on concentrated authority. The reversal makes the alignment between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments a contested achievement rather than a stable property of the form.

The inquiry proceeds through site-responsive analysis that follows sounds from capture through transformation and performance, supported by recording location, duration, permissions, acoustic perspective, processing chains, environmental change, and community inference. Observation is recorded before evaluation, then revisited after stakeholders' accounts and technical documentation are compared. The practical threshold is whether listeners can encounter compositional invention without the place being reduced to anonymous material. That threshold keeps the reading responsive to complexity without making every view equally persuasive.

The side-by-side inquiry revises the central vocabulary. The relation between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments is better understood as a contingent outcome than as a quality stored in a work or operation. The approach of site-responsive assessment that follows sounds from capture through transformation and performance identifies its material and social dependencies,

while contrary evidence prevents the concept from explaining every possible result and therefore explaining too little.

Detailed contextual framing may constrain imaginative listening and imply that documentary transparency resolves extraction. Answering this concern requires more than adding a warning to the conclusion. It changes source selection, since evidence of burden, refusal, and exclusion must be gathered alongside evidence of creative success. The governing test remains whether listeners can encounter compositional invention without the place being reduced to anonymous material, applied from more than one position.

Composers should develop consent and credit appropriate to sites, keep field logs, disclose major processing, and return work or resources to contributing communities. The practical proposal matters because values enter through routine operations. Budget lines, schedules, interfaces, contracts, and rehearsal habits determine whose knowledge can affect the outcome. Recording those judgments also lets future inquirers distinguish an accidental success from a repeatable and governable procedure.

Experimental cross-case reading could alter one condition at a time: sequence, scale, interface, access route, attribution, or revision rights. Combining those trials with collaborator interpretation would show which changes affect the interdependence between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments and which merely alter appearance. The goal would be an evidence-based repertoire of choices rather than a universal best undertaking.

A productive sample includes cases that initially appear unsuccessful. Failed coordination, rejected design, contested interpretation, and incomplete preservation can reveal the conditions of the alignment between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments more

clearly than a finished example. Such material should be studied with consent and context, not repackaged as a cautionary spectacle detached from people involved' explanations.

The framework is not a universal rating system. The interdependence between sonic abstraction and responsibility to source environments may be valued differently across communities, and public documentation may itself violate privacy or cultural protocol. The strategy must per-

mit restricted evidence, collective reading, and refusal, even when those choices limit external verification. Accountability sometimes depends on respecting a boundary rather than making every process transparent.

At issue is a model of responsibility suited to mediated cultural life. Responsibility does not demand perfect control, but it does require a credible account of dependency, uncertainty, and foreseeable outcome. The thesis gains force by nam-

ing what remains outside its reach.

Taken together, the two scenes show that the argument is relational and conditional. Environmental music can enlarge attention only if it also acknowledges the unequal power to record, move, and rename sound. The surroundings become musical not when they are owned by a composition, but when the composition learns to remain situated within them.