

A Dip In the Lake

Sound is an important element of our shared experience, shared cultural and acoustic space.

We present here a realisation of John Cage's text composition *A Dip in the Lake*.

The original piece was created in the city of Chicago, 1978. The graphic score (a map of Chicago with superimposed coordinates) now resides in the permanent collection of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. The first performance took place inside the SS Clipper, docked at Navy Pier, Chicago, on July 7 1982.

Our Aim: a Transparent recording process, to focus attention on the sounds themselves.

Communication through sound: we experience one another's intentions and movement through sound, and so it binds us, forms a shared community.

The fundamental approach of the piece is to select 427 locations using chance procedures applied to a city map, and take sound recordings at each location. The recorded material is then organized for playback, again using chance procedures.

Think of the recordings not simply as recorded sound, but as recorded time, recorded experience.

The original score text reads as follows:

For performer(s) or listener(s) or record maker(s); transcriptions may be made for other cities, or places, by assembling through chance operations a list of 427 addresses and then, also through chance operations, arranging these in ten groups of 2, 61 groups of 3, and 56 groups of 4).
John Cage, New York City 1978.

This is written on the title page, and then the rest of the score consists of a list of the selected addresses.

And as such you are listening here to a collage of captured time, space and experience.

For our version, we restricted ourselves to 157 locations due to practical considerations; we only had a few weeks to create the piece from scratch. (157 is the same number Cage used for a similar piece called *49 Waltzes for the 5 Boroughs*, created in New York 1977.)

A compression of experience.

There are 16 000 possible points on the map, each selected with a single throw of 5 dice.

We selected our locations using chance procedures applied to a map of York, limited to an area of approximately 9 Km² radiating out from the city center. We enlarged and printed a specific region of Ordnance Survey map #290, divided it into a grid of 40 squares, each divided into 4 quarters. A grid of 100 small squares (0.5 cm²) was then drawn onto an acetate transparency, and used to locate each precise point position within the selected quarter.

Sound is a phenomena we experience when mechanisms in our inner ear respond to oscillations of pressure transmitted through a solid, liquid or gas.

5 different sized dice were thrown simultaneously to select each point position. The first pair (one 8 sided and one 10 sided), chose the coarse grid square on the X,Y axis of the map.

We feel it physically, on our skin, in our bodies. Usually, for us, sound is transmitted in the air.

Then a 4 sided pyramid die selected one of the 4 quarters of this square. Two further 10 sided dice chose the specific point from the X,Y axis of the finer transparency grid overlaid on this quarter square.

And this is the same air that we breathe, that we share with one another and with other organic material in the environment.

A pin was inserted in the centre of the selected fine transparency grid square. Each of these small squares equated to an area on the map corresponding to approximately 3 terrace houses.

Our next step was to choose the time of day for each recording. We chose 25 locations by chance, and for these selected times between 12am and 6am, again by chance. We then selected times from 6am to 12am for the remaining 132 locations, once more using chance procedures.

The boundary between one physical entity and another is not so distinct. We coexist in a complex field of energy that we sense in different ways - electromagnetic waves are sensed as light, energy through heat, through sound.

We were disciplined with our selection procedure. Only 2 alterations were made to chance procedures. We altered the time of the York Minster and the National Railway Museum locations. The times for each fell in the middle of the night, and we reasoned that this was a waste of a good opportunity; we offset both times by 12 hours, so they fell in the middle of the afternoon.

Here, we are attempting to capture a snapshot of that light, heat and acoustic energy, and of the community that is bound together by this sharing, this exchange.

We allowed ourselves this small deviation in order to add more colour and variation to the finished work; our piece celebrates the diversity of life in York, and the use of chance procedures is designed to facilitate capturing something of this diversity.

If asked to select 157 locations on a map, the most likely response is to think of 'interesting' places, meaning places and situations that are already familiar in some way, and which you judge to be locations that will elicit interesting recordings. Also, selection will be biased to fit with convenient road or bus systems for example, and be an expression of unconscious personal habit.

The colours, sights and sounds of each location are still with us.

We are recording all the time.

Once the points were selected, we organised them into routes, by finding locations that were related by time and space. So a point at 17:00 might be linked to a point nearby at 17:30, and then another one at 18:30. In this way, a number of routes were established, and each was distributed to a field recording team. The routes are

marked on the displayed map using coloured strips of material.

The boundary between sound, feeling, light, art, sensation and the body, the boundary between the external world and our internal experience of it, are not so distinct

We enjoyed recording these sounds. It was fun to hear stories coming back from field recording trips - anecdotes, snippets of conversation overheard, people met. We have gathered as much of this material together as we can, and text relating to our experiences is on display here.

Sensing, synthesizing, transmitting; we are all transducers.

After field recording, the next part of the process was to edit the material, removing recording glitches and handling noise, or unwanted distortion caused by wind. Our subject was the sound of the environment itself, and we strived to make the technology as transparent as possible. Our ideal was for the audience to be drawn into the sound world of each individual location, and find interest in the juxtaposition of them; to be drawn into the work by the sounds themselves.

In a sense you are listening to a compression of experience. Think of the recordings not simply as recorded sound, but

as recorded time. You are standing in a field of stored memories.

Cage's original piece involved the use of tape machines. His recordings were made on tape, which were cut up, thoroughly mixed together at a tape splicing party, and then re-spliced. This meant that for playback, sounds were cut and spliced together by chance, frequently reversed, with no choice or judgment exercised regarding the organization of them. These reconstituted reels of tape were then played back on 12 separate tape machines in numerous different rooms on a docked ship.

Our realisation is different for many reasons. Our playback is simultaneous, from a single sound system, rather than in separate rooms. We are using a circle of 8 speakers, each with its own independent channel of amplification. The speakers work together as an ambisonic array, controlled by software that enables sounds to be positioned in a 3-dimensional ambisonic sound field.

Speech, language, music, vibration. Sound is carried in the medium we use to communicate. We share a common sound field.

We decided to exercise control over the balance of sound within our speaker array. The piece was not designed to come across as a din, a cacophony. We wanted to play with the way sounds interact, so that at times we could choose to hear a single sound clearly if we wanted to.

Reversal of sounds was also ruled out, as it would distract from the sounds in themselves, and draw attention to the production process.

Several sheets of paper containing 157 different coloured strips were printed out, with a number from 1 to 157 on each strip. These were cut up into individual ribbons. We then had our own tape splicing party, involving drawing the strips out of a hat in a local pub. We thus had a running order for 4 continuous separate tracks of material, which were mixed in the studio to create the final piece.

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The chance procedures utilised in the tape splicing party and the independently mixed tracks ensured an absence of control over which sounds fell together, and when each sound occurred. We did however make artistic decisions regarding how these sounds would interact with one another in the final mix.

A Dip In The Lake is a celebration of our shared acoustic space. It reminds us that we who live in this city are connected.

Jon Hughes