

Sound as a medium

In our daily lives, our eye and ear are constantly working together as a closely linked team to form our perception of the world. Traditionally practitioners in the plastic arts have adjusted this perception through vision, forming with shape and color. I on the other hand work with our sense of hearing.

The world of sound which we inhabit daily contains only a minuscule part of the sound universe which our ear minds are capable of understanding. The part of it that is literal is limited to the things in our world which make sounds – footsteps, cars, dogs, and the like. Its other part is made up of two codified areas, spoken language and music. Both of these occupy only small points in the spectrum of sound possibilities. The sounds I create are in the large sound space around and in-between these sounds of everyday life.

The essence of what I do when I build a sound work lies in the nature of the sounds I build into a given context, what I call the character of the sound. We all have a sense of sound character. We are born with it perhaps, or learn it at a very early age. It is inherent in our language, though unconscious; we use it as another layer of meaning on top of verbal language. It tells the listener how to interpret the verbal meaning. We do it without thinking by shaping the contours of tone and emphasis in our speech and also by adjusting the sound of different parts of the words. Our response to these nuances is highly refined. Through minute differences in sound character we are often able to pinpoint the birthplace of a speaker. One could describe sound character as having several continuums of meaning lying between distant points, say, harsh and smooth or rich and thin or warm and cold, superimposed upon one another. In the area between these points, within the nature of the sound itself, lies an immense zone of meaning. Its expressions are transcultural; they are neither literal nor codified.

In music this dimension is called sound color. It was introduced with the emergence of orchestration as a musical dimension, the idea that there is aesthetic meaning inherent in the nature of the sound itself, not just the melody and harmony. You don't have the same work if you play just the melody and harmony of an orchestrated work on the piano. In music, though, it is only part of the meaning. We can still recognize the piece without the orchestra if we play it on the piano.

I have been interested in going further, distilling this essence, this inborn language, letting it be the sole carrier of meaning in a sound work. That's what I do when I construct a work's sound.

Max Neuhaus, 1997

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