

Exploring Sonic Lifeworlds: Collaborative soundscape composition in the large choral ensemble

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Singers in this collaborative choral music creation project explored how sounds gathered from their everyday lives could speak to aspects of place, identity, and community in new vocal soundscape compositions they created, graphically notated, and presented with participation from the entire choir. “Exploring Sonic Lifeworlds” took place between February-April 2023 with the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) Concert Choir, director Patrick Murray, and facilitator jashen edwards.

This project was divided into three parts, which serve as standalone activities and as a sequence that builds skills and understanding around collaborative composition and collective meaning in sound. Below, we provide expanded instructions and resources for each activity. While we ran this project for participants in a large choral ensemble, *these resources are adaptable for musical groups of all kinds. We encourage community music leaders to be their own facilitators and adapt these activities for their own purposes, or be in touch if interested in exploring them with us.*

Part 1: Sound Session Workshop

In this sound and music improvisation workshop, participants reengage everyday sounds from their environments in fun, creative and critical ways. Prior to the workshop, participants are asked to listen out for sounds from their everyday life that they find intriguing. Using their mobile phone’s voice memo app, they record and upload their individual sounds to the Sound Collection & Classification (SCC) table — a specially designed online collaborative space (see resource below). During the in-person two-hour workshop, participants analyze, critique, discuss and describe how sounds ordinarily gone “unheard” actually help shape their understanding about identity, space, place and their relationship to the wider-world around them. Using their musical knowledge, participants connect concepts such as timbre, pitch, melody, and pulse to each sound, thus realizing sounds “musically” via their voices and musical instruments.

Facilitation Tip:
During the workshop, use sounds available on the SCC table to move participants through a process of listening and responding to each sound. Discover similarities and nuances between various sounds. For example, which sounds are more melodic, percussive, drone-like, etc.? Practice mimicking sounds together and in small groups. Then, began improvising patterns together. Rehearse and critique, and repeat until you find a layering that “fits” or syncs-up (i.e. groove). This groove becomes an ostinato (i.e. a continually repeated musical phrase or rhythm) that can be remixed and layered in real-time

This is accomplished utilizing a *layering and remixing technique*. First, we listen to sounds on the SCC table as a group. Participants share why particular sounds hold significance for them. Then, participants collaboratively work to mimic each sound as closely as possible using their voices and available musical instruments. Next, they layer three to five sounds together to create a sonic texture replete with rhythmic, melodic and harmonic content, structure and phrasing—similar to how a producer or composer plays with musical material to create story, suspense and motivic development. Thus, everyday sounds became musical material (i.e. notes, tones, rhythmic figuration etc.). Finally, after rehearsing sounds that “fit” together, participants perform various iterations of their sound piece, each time experimenting and refining using shifts in dynamics, tempo and phrasing.

The purpose of this workshop is to familiarize participants with creative musicking processes using everyday sounds from their life. Following the two-hour workshop, choral members were better equipped to reimagine their role as creators and composers of their own collaborative pieces, preparing them for the collaborative soundscape composition project in Part 2.

Resource: Sound Collection and Classification Table

The Sound Collection and Classification (SCC) table is an online collaborative space for all participants to upload and reflect on their recorded sounds. The SCC table is a repository for participants to draw from for musical inspiration and instrumentation/orchestration creative ideas, as well as a site to prompt critical dialogue about sound and its attributed meanings in participants’ lives.

Below is an explanation of the 7 data points collected and shared on the SCC table:

1. **Sound** — Please record and upload 1 to 3 sound clips (WAV, MP3, FLAC etc.). Each sound clip should be between 3-10 seconds in length.
2. **Sensation** — Describe your initial visceral, or gut sensation(s) to the sound (e.g. laughter, startle, sad, disorientation, irritated, etc.)
3. **Space | Time** — Identify where you were and what time you heard the sound.
4. **Source** — Identify the sound source.
5. **Significance | Context** — Describe any meanings, triggers, memories etc. each sound may have for you.
6. **Musical Aspects** — List and describe any musical characteristics or aspects each sounds may possess (e.g. timbre, pitch, dynamics, chord cluster etc.)
7. **Musical (Re)Sound** — Consider and describe any orchestrative potential each sound may possess. In other words, how might sounds be used as musical notes, rhythms or instruments?

Please record 3 sound clips (~3-7 seconds)

1. Natural World (e.g. animal, wind, rain, etc.)
2. Technological World (e.g. car, computer, air conditioner)
3. Embodied Self (e.g. laughter, whistling, fingersnaps, etc.)

SOUND	SPACE TIME	SENSATION REACTION	SIGNIFICANCE	CURIOSITY WONDERMENT
what is the sound you recorded?	where were you when you heard the sound?	how did you feel hearing the sound?	does the sound remind you of a person, place or event in your life?	what do you wonder about this sound?
1 S O U N D				
2 S O U N D				
3 S O U N D				

SCC 2 TABLE

SOUND What is the sound you recorded?	SENSATION What feeling(s) come up for you?	SPACE TIME Where were you when you heard the sound?	SOURCE What made the sound?	SIGNIFICANCE CONTEXT Does the sound remind you of a person, place or event in your life?	MUSICAL ASPECTS (e.g. pitch, timbre, drone, etc.)	MUSICAL (RE)SOUND What instrument(s) best replicate the sound?
S O U N D 1						
S O U N D 2						
S O U N D 3						

SCC 1 is designed for younger children who may want to go on a ‘sound scavenger adventure’ exploring a few sounds and thinking about them from an ecological and embodied perspective. SCC 2, on the other hand, may be used to gather more information, including “musical aspects” and potential. Or, you may choose any combination of these tables to suit your specific needs.

Facilitation Tip:

Sounds from the SCC table will be used in the next part of the project to create soundscape compositions. As participants are uploading very personal sounds, let them know that any group that wishes to use their sound in their final composition will need to ask for permission to incorporate and use it.

We recommend setting up an online SCC table through the Padlet app (www.padlet.com); this is an online space where participants can view and comment on each others’ uploads. You can see several examples below.

- Padlet app set up as an SCC table
 - <https://padlet.com/patrickmurray256/sound-collection-and-classification-table-example-mcb02fud08ycwqmd>
- Example Padlet from UTSC Concert Choir.
 - <https://padlet.com/patrickmurray256/copy-of-utsc-concert-choir-soundworld-submissions-ox0b2j7ao6znd408>
 - Note that for this class we did not format this as an SCC table, but participants commented on SCC categories in their uploads and discussed sounds in class using the SCC table.

Part 2: Soundscape composition activity

Participants organize into small groups (3-6 people) to create short (1-2 minute) vocal soundscape compositions about a topic/theme of their choice, using tools gained from the Sound Session Workshop, which they will present involving participation from the entire ensemble. *At UTSC, we provide groups with ~ 1 month of independent work time before the final presentation in class.*

Give participants the following parameters for their compositions:

- Your piece must be “about” something (an idea, a place, a cause, an experience...)
- Your piece must involve vocal sound. It may also include other kinds of sound-making, including instruments, pre-recorded sound, body percussion, etc.
 - *If doing this activity with a different kind of musical group, adjust this requirement to match your instrumentation.*
- Your piece must have a clear structure involving at least three different sounds entering/evolving in sequence, including one sound gathered or re-created from the SCC Table.
- Your piece must involve participation from all members of your small group as well as the entire choir/ensemble.
- Your group must be able to demonstrate/teach and present your soundscape with the ensemble in approximately 10 minutes.

Facilitation Tip:

While “soundscape” is our chosen term for these kinds of compositions, participants at UTSC interpreted this broadly; some groups created participatory songs using melody and rhythm as well as environmental sound, while others create more “traditional” sound pieces. Be flexible and let your participants make something meaningful to them!

Here are some questions to guide groups through creating and presenting their soundscapes:

Facilitation Tip:

Encourage participants to avoid thinking about whether their soundscape will be “good” or “bad.” Rather, “have you thoughtfully created something that gets people involved in making music with you, uses music and sound to convey a message, and communicates something about who we are as a musical community?”

- What do you want your soundscape to be about? (A place? An event? A memory? A genre of music or art? A cause? An idea?)
- What unique sound or skill does each member of your group bring to the project?
- What sound or sounds must be in your soundscape?
 - What sounds inspire you?
 - What sounds relate to your theme or your group?
 - What sound(s) do you want to incorporate from our Padlet?
- How will the choir participate in your soundscape?
- How will you arrange sounds in time?
 - How can you create a beginning, middle, and end to your soundscape through different sounds?
 - How can you create interest, contrast, variation, evolution in sound quality?
- What is the role of each member of your group in the soundscape?
 - To teach/demonstrate to the choir?
 - To perform?
- How can you easily teach/demonstrate to the choir their role in the soundscape within the short amount of time you have?

Part 3: Graphic scoring activity

During their work together, groups have inevitably created their own notes and materials to represent and remember their soundscape in ways that make sense to them. The following activity explores these different ways of “notating” music, unpacking what it means to be musically “literate” in holistic and grounded ways.

In this activity, each singer creates a “score” for their group’s soundscape that could serve as a teaching aid or guide for someone else to follow or reproduce their piece. Provide participants with a template (see next page) to help represent certain musical elements, including duration/timing and layering of sound, which they can use or not as they choose. Participants may use any combination of text, graphics, or varying forms of musical notation broadly conceived (tablature, solfege, notation from non-Western cultures, digital data) to represent their soundscape.

With participants’ permission, create an online gallery of scores associated with each soundscape. If you have time, discuss together the similarities and differences. Can you remember or re-create that group’s soundscape by looking at the score? In what ways does each score make you want to creatively engage with this music, and why?

Facilitation Tip:

Scores need not completely represent all aspects of a composition. For example, if a group has written a melody and doesn’t know how to write it down, that’s fine. Encourage participants to engage fully with the aspects of their composition they do feel can be represented visually.

Graphic Score Template for "Exploring Sonic Lifeworlds"

Soundscape Title

Your name and group



Duration:

(Layer 1)

(Layer 2)

(Layer 3)

Duration:

Duration: