



Soundscapes

Have you ever heard the word 'soundscape' before? It's a relatively new word; it comes from combining the idea of a 'landscape' - a visual scene - with sound, and refers to a recording of the sounds that we can hear in a particular place. NHK radio has been producing soundscapes for many years, broadcasting them under the Japanese title Oto no Fukei.

Radio reception in my present home is very poor, so I am unable to listen to that program these days, but in my previous apartment it was much better, and I enjoyed the soundscapes immensely. I taped a number of those broadcasts from the radio, and still play them now and again. When one listens to a well-made soundscape with a good pair of headphones, the effect is so realistic you feel as though you have been transported right to the actual location.

As a good example of this, I have never been to the famous Oze Marshes, but having listened to an NHK soundscape of the area many times, I am sure that I will feel right at home come the day when I do finally make a visit there.

My interest in soundscapes goes right back to high school days. Our music room had a tape recorder - a large four-track unit, which was very 'hi-tech' for those days. It was so bulky that it was built into a special cart, which could be wheeled to various positions in the music room for taping. A friend and I used this for making 'soundscapes'. It was so massive that we certainly couldn't take it anywhere outside, but we did wheel it around the school hallways, plugging it in here and there to record some of the sounds of daily school life. I never kept any of the tapes we made - anyway they were on old-fashioned very large reels - but it would certainly be interesting to hear them now. Or perhaps they would show no particular differences with modern sounds in the same environment, who knows.

But I have to mention just why I bring up this topic now. I always keep a little voice recorder in my pocket to help me keep memos and notes, but the one I have used for a few years has been showing signs of breaking down. When I did a bit of research on the internet to choose a replacement, I found that recording technology is very much advanced in recent years, and some of the small pocket-size recorders are now capable of making very high quality recordings.

I purchased a unit that was receiving good reviews, and after trying it out, quickly added my own voice to the chorus of recommendations from satisfied users. I am far from being a professional sound engineer, but I think I do have fairly critical ears, and this little unit produces recordings that, to me, are indistinguishable from reality.

So as you can guess, I now have another 'part time career', as a producer of soundscapes! For the first attempt, I mounted the recorder in my workshop, positioned where it could pick up not only the sounds from the work, but also the sounds from the open windows. I was rewarded with beginner's luck - during the recording session my friend the local kingfisher decided to pay a visit, and his beautiful voice has now been captured for posterity.

Now recordings of a woodblock printmaker banging away at his workbench aren't really of all that much interest to most people I think, but I know what I'm going to try next - re-visiting the three places where I camped for my large 'My Solitudes' printmaking project, this time with recorder in hand. I think the resulting soundscapes should provide an interesting complement to the prints that I created.

Then again ... perhaps not. After all, the best way to listen to a soundscape is with your eyes closed!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>