# Resounding Experience – an Interview with Bill Fontana

by Jøran Rudi

In this interview, Bill Fontana discusses his approach to listening as a personal process of the discovery of hidden sounds and the rediscovery of sounds that have been ignored and forgotten. His approach is driven by his fascination with sound itself, and the comprehensive networks of meaning that can be unraveled if one considers listening to be a creative act. This point of departure is clearly audible in his works, and he explains his processes of selecting material and composing with them. Fontana illustrates his points with many examples and anecdotes from his works and the reception of them, and presents his wishes for the audience.

**JR: Bill Fontana, your history as an artist dates back to the early 1970s, and you have created a huge number of different sound and soundscape works. If you were to describe the broad lines in the development of your interests as an artist, what would you emphasize?**

BF: When I began, I was interested in how the world makes music, and how the act of listening is a way of making music. I have been trying to create an art form that will let other people discover the magic in listening, I suppose. And that is why so many of the projects I have done have been site-specific, and set up in such a way that the audience has had a chance to have their own point of view in a space.

My understanding of technology has gradually developed, and nowadays I think of sound not only in the air, but also in solid materials. I am deeply involved with measurement technology for vibration and sound, and I work very closely with the big engineering company Arup, which is based in London. So I started out with something, and the path has slowly grown and developed over time.

**JR: In your works, you seem to be listening in different ways, for example in the Paris work *Sound Island*; on the monument you were listening to the sounds from the coast, under the street you**

**had an underwater-perspective, while on the top of the monument you had sounds streamed in from different locations in the city. So on one hand, you are listening to the sonic detail in the sound as such, and on the other you are listening to actions in different locations in Paris – you seem to have different listening strategies going on.**

**You are also working with sonic detail on many levels, from very detailed and small-scale spectra such as in *Harmonic Bridge* from 2006, to massive large-scale sounds, as in *Vertical Water* that you put up on the facade of the Whitney Museum in New York in 1991. Do you believe that these differences in focus – large or small-scale – would suggest different listening experiences? Do you think that people listen differently to sounds that are basically invisible – that can't be tied to a source – and to the sounds that you can recognize easily?**

BF: Well, my use of sounds is not passive, or objective, because I am taking these sounds and radically altering the context where you would experience them, and that changes their meaning considerably. You know, standing next to the horseshoe falls, seeing and feeling the Niagara Falls in front of you, is very different from being in front of the Whitney Museum, but somehow, you are still overwhelmed by this sound, that's sort of your experience, and it is still tied to the original Niagara Falls in some way. And for invisible sounds, we can think of the sounds from the *Millennium Bridge* that I used at the Tate Modern in London. First of all, these are sounds that no one can even hear anyhow, because they are hidden in the structure of the bridge itself, and when you play them in a space like the turbine hall with its special acoustic properties, they take on (I hate to use this word) a kind of magic in how they interact with the acoustics of the space.

I am doing a project now, a site-specific project for the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, where the sounds in the piece comes out of the building itself. What I discovered was that the most interesting sounds that this building made took place in the boiler room, the mechanical room in the building, from heating, water circulation and so on. So, I went in there with a couple of really good engineers, over a period of months, and I had twelve accelerometers mounted on machinery and pipes in this room, and the accelerometers were extracting very, quite beautiful, quite

musical, harmonics and water running through the pipes, so it ended up sounding very natural actually, in this installation. This installation is a hybrid installation because on the one hand I am using these very unusual ultrasonic emitters that are mounted on Pan Tilt heads, and they are projecting these very linear narrow beams of sound, so you get these incredibly fast moving shifting patterns that are quite interesting, and behind the space where the Pan Tilt heads are, there's a wall where an 8-channel Meyer sound system is hidden. The Meyer speakers are receiving the same signals as the ultrasonic speakers, and the signals going to the Meyers are passing through a certain cascading sequence of short time delays, so that when the Meyers fade into the mix, they create this illusion of a great space. So, I would call it an experiment with a dimensional shift, using ordinary sounds.

There are many listening strategies that one may have, and I don't think there is such a thing as objectivity when you're listening – it is always a very personal act. In the Paris project, I was interested in the exterior of the monument, in the fact that the sound of the sea is a natural form of white noise, and that you could transform someone's relationship not only to that monument as a visual icon, but that you could also silence the traffic in the noisiest place in Paris by playing something so familiar as the sound of the sea. In the access tunnels to the monument, the sounds were also coming from Normandy, but they were not the sounds from the air, they were the sounds from the water, the underwater sounds. And when I started to look at the Arc de Triomphe as an architectural monument, I was of course fascinated by the wonderful view of Paris that you had from the top. When I looked out at Paris, I imagined the sounds of the places that I could see, and it seemed to be an interesting idea to hear as far as you could see. I thought that I would try to create an experience for visitors that would do that.

**JR: Yes, I recognize the idea of expanding the acoustic horizon from several of your other works as well, expanding the acoustic horizon and always supporting that by changing the context.**

**In your stunning work *River Sounding* from London this spring, you are working with many close ups of sound from different locations along the waterway, and you have composed a carefully crafted piece that is available on your website.[1] You have made selections following several months of preparatory work. Can**

**you say something about which criteria you used for selecting your material for the work?**

BF: Well, that installation was done in Somerset House, which is a beautiful old palace on the Thames, from where admiral Nelson actually commanded the British navy during the Napoleonic Wars. At that time, navy barges could actually enter the building directly from the water, but after the London underground was built, it severed this connection between the building and the river. The spaces that I was working in were spaces on the level of the river, normally closed to the public.

I did a lot of research on the Thames, on the history of the river and different locations on the Thames. And before visiting them, I made a huge list of places and just imagined the kind of sounds that would happen in these places, and I was very fortunate to have a really great organization assisting me in the realization of the project, Sound and Music,[2] and they were very well organized in terms of making appointments for me to go to these places and record – it was quite systematic. And then I visited these places, and had a lot of interaction with the people responsible for them, because I was quite interested in knowing people's stories about the places in order to get a real feel for them.

So I spent a lot of time travelling the river in order to find sound locations that I thought were special, and I then created an acoustic journey through these spaces. I approach every recording with the same seriousness as someone would approach recording a symphony orchestra concert, and with the best recording technology that I have access to. All the recordings for the Somerset House-piece were on an 8-channel hard disk Sound Devices recorder, using DPA microphones. And I have always had this habit of recording sounds the way they're supposed to be, for me the act of listening is magical and I also want to find that when I make the recording.

And by the way, this project is a bit different from my previous projects; it was probably the first time that I made use of video. Along the journey through the spaces in the building there were these small cave-like chambers, originally used for storage, that I had small video installations in: sounding points from the river, with a static camera view. When people entered these spaces, they would sort of slow down, stop and gaze for awhile and then go

back and continue this journey. Some of the sounds they would be hearing in these chambers were the same as the sounds that were moving around in the big mix, so it was a very sort of organic relationship. I enjoyed the learning experience of adding that on, as I have never so extensively used video before.

**JR: So, after preparation, selecting sites and making recordings, you are in the studio with your recordings. When you are selecting sounds for the installation or making the stereo example that is on the web, do you then go by the narrative of the sites you found, or do you go by the qualities of the sounds?**

BF: I'm going with the qualities of the sounds. In this case, I was also trying to simulate somehow what the experience in Somerset House could have been in the way it was mixed down, because I had 64 layers of sound that were moving and shifting positions and together became very immersive. I needed to do that as sort of a draft for myself, so that when I was actually going to create the big mix, I had an idea of what I was trying to achieve.

**JR: The sample stereo mix on your webpage[3] has a clear, composed quality; it is a composed piece, where selected material has been woven into a whole. In this composition, you are setting up a framework for the listeners' experience of all the water sounds, and do you have specific ideas for what you would like the listener to come away with? How much of you do we hear?**

BF: Well, I guess that I'm trying to create a journey, because these are not sounds that you normally hear in the same place at the same time. They exist in different places, and I am trying to create a large view of all these things together, and let it be up to the listener to decide upon what that view means. I certainly don't focus on processing and altering the sounds themselves, I combine them to create a story.

This example mix was merely a model, an example of what this piece could be, yet mimicking the real installation experience. It was a journey through the architecture, and where you were in the journey really determined what you heard and how you heard it – what combinations of sound that you heard. So the visitors, through their journey and how they reacted to it, really determined

the experience, and I think that the mix I did really was a starting point, not an ending point.

**JR: A key method in your works is what you describe as resounding, and the word is now closely associated with your moving sound from one context into another, changing the perception of the new location by introducing associations other than those one would normally have there, and probably changing the perception of the sound that you pipe in there as well. This method makes your works depend heavily on the references for both the new context and the relocated sounds. Which roles does referentiality play in your works? Do these references play a key role in how you think about making the works, or do you mainly focus on the constellations that you are setting up?**

BF: *Resoundings* has been the name of my website since 1998. The word has to do with not only the repetition of a sound, but also with 'getting it' – that it resonates and activates something in the listener. People hear a lot of sounds without paying attention to them, so the idea of resounding is that someone 'gets' the sound.

I think that I'm interested in the juxtaposition between the sound that I am bringing into a space and the sounds that are naturally there, but for me the perfect solution in installing sound is that it feels natural in the space, that it somehow feels plausible to be there in the space and that it doesn't feel artificial. In the project from the turbine hall of Tate Modern, *Harmonic Bridge*, many people thought that the sounds that I was putting there were actually made by the building – which I was very happy to hear. As I mentioned earlier, the sounds in that installation were from vibrations and resonances in this bridge crossing the Thames.

**JR: So, it is not really important to you, at least in this work, that the people are referring back to the context the sounds originate from?**

BF: Well a lot of people of course do, but in a museum like that, with a wide audience, some people pay attention and some don't. And the people that did not pay attention thought that the building was making the sounds, while others knew what this was, knew that the Millennium Bridge was making the sounds. Anyway, I felt quite happy with either one, I felt pleased that someone who was

not thinking about this could walk past it and think it was just normal for the sounds to be there.

**JR: Another work with a strong sonic identity is *Vertical Water* from 1991, also mentioned above. Was the Niagara Falls reference important?**

BF: The reason that I used Niagara Falls was first of all that I was interested in trying to alter the traffic noise on Madison Avenue, which was very busy. And, when looking at postcards of the Whitney Museum, I turned one of the cards upside down, and the architecture reminded me of some kid's rendering of a waterfall. So I thought that I needed a waterfall, and Niagara Falls was interesting because it is huge.

**JR: Many soundscape composers like to present their material as unchanged and untreated as possible, seemingly untouched; 'authenticity' is often a key word for the composers. Truthful renderings of an environment will also give credibility to arguments with political or environmental connotations. You have stated earlier that you do not have any external agendas attached to your works, but is the intention of authenticity something you relate to?**

BF: Yes, I don't have any external agendas with my works, and this is the main reason why I normally don't participate in symposiums, because so many of them revolve around specific agendas.

I also think that authenticity is a very confusing word. On one the hand I am very respectful of the sounds, but in the way that they're recorded I deliberately try to reach what can be considered their essence, trying to really get to their energy source. I don't think that there is such a thing as objectivity with sound, it is always very personal, and one always has some sort of perspective on a situation. My approach to it is to try to understand the dynamics of the situation, and when recording, deciding on the best way to record it – with a binaural mike or with a surround-mike, or with widely spaced omnidirectional mikes, or accelerometers. I think of the sound as part of a whole dynamic system, and try to find a way of recording it where it is possible to bring it back to life. So, I am not sure that I like the word authentic.

**JR: Do you think that such external agendas for the works influence their artistic merit in some way, that they take something away from the artistic integrity, that if you put too much of an agenda into something that is presented as art, you are taking something away from the art?**

BF: Well, in my opinion it does, because if you're interested in influencing a political agenda, I think there are better ways of doing it than with sound art. But different art forms are quite different. I think filmmaking, for example Michael Moore's films, have been quite important in that regard, and I think films of that nature, with a documentary narrative, has a quite different potential for sustaining external agendas.

I think the most important thing you could do with sound is to create an experience that causes someone to think about something. Listening is a creative act where the listener makes the music.

**JR: Do you think that resoundings can make it easier for the listeners to become aware of their own environments, be they urban or natural, as music, and that the musical experience of the environment in some way can bring the listener more in touch with it?**

BF: Well, I would hope so, but I think this is kind of an uphill battle in our culture, because so many people walk around with headphones on their ears, listening to mp3-players and so on. They're in some acoustic bubble where they are disconnected from their surroundings, and I feel like I'm trying to create experiences that somehow can cause somebody to disconnect from that and rediscover being present and aware at a certain moment in time.

Working with a time-based art such as mine, where I have had the opportunity to use many live microphones, listening at the same time to the city or the natural environment, and to develop a sense of how amazing a moment in time is and how much is happening in a certain moment in time – I guess that I want to create an opportunity for someone to discover the magic of that.

I can also tell you a very funny story about a small installation I did some years ago in an American Midwestern city that used to manufacture railroad locomotives. I did a sound piece in the town square of that city, and it was based on recordings of train whistles. And after my piece was finished and had been removed, somebody

– a concerned citizen – called the art organization and complained that the train sounds were too loud. Because what had happened was that she was suddenly noticing and hearing the sounds that she had ignored for most of her life; somehow the presence of my work had caused her to start hearing them again. She didn't realize that these sounds had been part of her environment all her life, and thought that it was me who played the sounds because she suddenly heard them! So that's a pretty strong yes to your question!

1. http://www.resoundings.org
2. http://soundandmusic.org/
3. http://resoundings.org/Pages/River_Sounding.html