

## LISTENING FOR THE PAST

A composer's ear-lead approach to exploring island culture past and present in the Outer Hebrides

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### Abstract

The landscapes of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland are littered with the visual remnants of a turbulent past but can past events be said to leave sonic as well as visual traces? This article discusses three aspects of a practice-based research project. The first is the author's exploration of these islands and their history through sound in order to try to find elusive sonic traces of the past. The second concerns the issues and problems of finding and recording sound in the Outer Hebrides. The third is the artistic challenge of communicating something about history and memory, related to the Outer Hebrides, through the medium of composed sound using a mixture of monologues, field recordings and interviews collected during a number of trips to the islands as well as material from oral history archives. This article refers specifically to two finished compositions, 'Tweed' and 'On the Machair', which are both freely available to listen to online. 'Tweed' is available as part of 'Playing with Words: an audio compilation' at: <http://www.gruenrekorder.de> - and 'On the Machair' is available as part of *Autumn Leaves* at: [http://www.gruenrekorder.de/?page\\_id=218](http://www.gruenrekorder.de/?page_id=218)

### Keywords

Outer Hebrides, sound, composition, recording, history

### Introduction

I am writing as a composer and sound artist with an abiding interest in sound, history and memory. In my artistic and academic practice (as a practitioner/researcher) sound is both a methodology (discovering through active listening to sound, reading about sound, etc.) and a means of dissemination (through making sound recordings and using them to compose with). This article focuses on recent practice-led research<sup>1</sup>, the culmination of a long engagement with the Outer Hebrides over the past three decades. The specific research trip that I shall be discussing below was made in Autumn 2006. These islands are a unique environment by virtue of their specific history, geology, culture, location and, of course, their remoteness. The research investigates the sounds of the Outer Hebrides with the over-arching aim of discovering whether history, past lives and past events leave some sort of sonic trace behind. In order to do this, my initial research sought to imaginatively recreate the sounds of the past in my 'mind's ear' informed by archival and scholarly research into photographic records, oral history and

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other recorded material and text. I then undertook intense and focused listening fieldwork in the islands, including interviews, in order to try to find those sounds, establish what might have happened to them and compare what I might have expected to hear from the initial research with what I really did hear. I made extensive sound recordings, when possible, with the aim of presenting my findings primarily through a series of sound compositions. Two of these compositions are completed and are available online.

This article starts by introducing the Outer Hebrides then expands on the purpose of the research. It goes on to discuss background research before the processes of listening to and recording the islands in situ, and then the final stage, which was composing with the sounds of the Outer Hebrides. A short conclusion discusses the difference between expectation and the sonic reality.



Figure 1 – map showing position of Outer Hebrides

## The Outer Hebrides

The Outer Hebrides (Hebrides is derived from the Norse 'Havbreyday' meaning 'isles on the edge of the sea', and in Gaelic 'Eilean Siar', translated as 'Western Isles') form a 130-mile long archipelago about 40 miles off the north-west coast of Scotland. To the west, they look out to the Atlantic Ocean and on the east side they are separated from the Scottish mainland and from the islands of the Inner Hebrides by the stormy waters of the Minch. There are more than 200 islands in the Outer Hebrides but only a few are now inhabited. The best known of these islands are Barra, Benbecula, Berneray, Harris, Lewis and North and South Uist.

In the 2001 census, the total population of the islands was 26,502 and Harris and Lewis (which are joined together) was, in combination, the 13th most populous island of the British Isles with 19,918 inhabitants. In the same census, the population of North Uist was recorded as 1,271, Benbecula 1,219, South Uist 1,818 and Barra 1,078, while smaller islands such as Eriskay, Berneray and Flodaigh had populations of 133, 136 and 11 respectively. Whilst there has been an overall slow population decline in the islands over the last two hundred years, peaks and troughs in the numbers of inhabitants have been associated with, and caused by, economic and political fluctuations. One of the major causes of growth from the mid 1700s was the rise of the kelp industry based on the collection of seaweed to be burnt for use in the manufacture of glass and soap. The population of the islands rose from 40,000 in the 1750s to 90,000 in the 1840s (Cooper, 1988). When the market crashed, poverty and famine, including potato blight in the 1840s, stepped in, leading to whole villages being evicted by landowners, often brutally, to make way for the higher profits of sheep farming, to meet the new demand for wool (much of it used in the making of uniforms for the army) and mutton, and later for deer. During these forced clearances, many people took assisted passages to Canada and Australia and, later in the 19th Century, to as far away as Patagonia and the Falkland Islands. The subsequent hardship for those who were left was well documented by the Napier Commission. This Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Napier, was set up to enquire into the conditions of the crofters and landless cottars<sup>2</sup> of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The evidence was collected from 775 people interviewed in 61 locations throughout the Highlands and Islands and told a sorry tale of poverty, deprivation and exploitation. Its publication in 1884 led to the 1886 Crofters Act which granted increased security and stability to the crofters and established a system for fair rents as well as the right to claim compensation from any improvements made by the landlord and to pass their land on to their descendants.

Well into the 20th and even the 21st centuries, much of the island lands were and are owned by absentee landlords, and the islanders' struggles for self determination and economic and political control have continued, albeit in different forms from the violent earlier battle with landlords and police who had been sent to effect the clearances<sup>3</sup>. Relatively recently, in November 2006, South Uist residents took control of the island after a protracted campaign, resulting in most of South Uist, neighbouring Benbecula, and the smaller island of Eriskay being sold to a community company known as Stòras Uibhist, which was set up to purchase the land and to manage it in perpetuity. The 92,000 acre estate was purchased from the previous landowners, a sporting syndicate, for £4.5 million. Most of North Uist, however, is still privately owned by the Granville family. In the present day, however, more than two thirds of the population of the Western Isles lives on community-owned estates.

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The Outer Hebrides is the most strongly coherent Scottish Gaelic (Gàidhlig) speaking area in the world. Gaelic is a Celtic language related to Welsh, Cornish and Breton. In the 1901 and 1921 censuses, all parishes were reported to be over 75% Gaelic speaking. By 1971, most areas were still more than 75% Gaelic speaking, and the language remains relatively strong in spite of a continued decline. In the 2001 census 61.1% of the population of the Outer Hebrides spoke Gaelic (compared with 1.2% in the whole of Scotland). A handful of Gaelic speakers can be found in the United States, Canada and Australia, most of who are descended from 19th Century emigrants.

Religion is still a significant factor in the life of the inhabitants of the Outer Hebrides. The southern islands of Benbecula, South Uist and Barra are predominantly Roman Catholic. In the northern islands, especially Harris and Lewis, the non-conformist Free Church of Scotland and the still more conservative Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland are very influential. There is a tradition of Sabbath observance and few shops or transport services are available on Sunday, although this is increasingly contested. Emigration to the mainland, other parts of the UK and even elsewhere in the world still continues, particularly among the young, as the islands offer few employment opportunities. Most present day commercial activities concern tourism, including heritage tourism; crofting; fishing; fish farming; and weaving, including the manufacture of Harris tweed, a cloth that has been hand-woven by the islanders in their homes, using pure virgin wool that has been dyed and spun in the Outer Hebrides.

### Background Research

Sound, history and memory have been of long standing compositional and academic research interest for me (Lane, 2009, 2007, 2006). This has often led me to work with archive material, particularly oral history recordings. Immediately prior to this research trip to the Outer Hebrides, I spent time in both the Sound and the Photography archives at the School of Scottish Studies and the Scottish Life Archive at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. The Sound archive has a huge amount of recordings, mainly old and fragile, mainly on reel-to-reel tape, and predominantly of folksong and folklore. Much of the oral history material is in Gaelic with little available translation. The material that I came away with was very different to what I expected to find, relying, as it did, on time, the interests of the interviewer concerned, the vagaries of the archive cataloguing system, the technical state of the recordings and the level of translation available. These oral history recordings, some made as long ago as 1963, supply a valuable audible link back into the 19th Century and relate stories of events such as the clearances, ciphered through two or three fewer generations than could be found in the present day.

The photographic archives provided me with a series of visual clues about what kind of sounds I might want to try to seek out. My study of Werner Kissling's photographs of Hebridean life from the 1930s along with Paul Strand's and Gus Wylies's more recent photographic works, was augmented by reading works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, scholarly works, reminiscences, such as Ferguson's (2003) *Children of the Blackhouse* and Cameron's (1986) *Go Listen to the Crofters*, based on evidence given by crofters about their lives and work to the Napier commission in the late 19th Century.

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This initial research provided me with a rich range of questions to try to answer, places to visit and a list of possible sounds to try to source or at least find out what they may have been replaced by. It also furnished me with some audio material from the sound archives that I might later be able to use as part of a composition, and it began to re-educate my ears to aspects of the sound environment of the Outer Hebrides, specifically that of the speech and, of course, the Gaelic language.

My sounds list, which was largely drawn from studying photographs, included the following:

- Animals living in croft houses – chickens, cows (houses shared with cows).
- Interiors of blackhouses<sup>4</sup> – fire from the peats, dog, knitting
- Hobnail boots
- Pipe smoking
- Knitting while walking
- Mary Bean or Mollucca Bean – snuff – sneezing
- Halloween guisers<sup>5</sup>
- Bent grass<sup>6</sup>
- Creel making: Garrynamonie, S. Uist
- 'Plad' weaving from croft in S. Uist
- Wool sheered/washed/dried dyed outside near loch on open fire
- Carding and spinning – women with spinning wheel or by hand
- Waulking<sup>8</sup>
- Weaving (Weaver - Mrs Macleod Hillside cottage Ardhasaig near Tarbert Harris)
- Herring gutting
- Watermills: Shawbost, Lewis and Fivepenny, Borve, Lewis
- Wildfowling: St Kilda<sup>9</sup> (puffin, rod and fulmar) and Ness (guga)<sup>10</sup>
- Whale carcasses in St Kilda bay<sup>11</sup>
- Lazybeds<sup>12</sup>
- Milk churns
- Boat builders- Port of Ness
- Eating raw dulse<sup>13</sup>
- Heather rush or bent grass used inside
- Lighting a cruise lamp<sup>14</sup> – reeds
- Horse drawn sled and cart

### Listening to the Outer Hebrides

There are two things that are particularly difficult to escape in the Outer Hebrides – the weather, often extreme and almost always windy, and the past.

*I'm never sure whether it's the imagination or something less easily explained, but there are times in some emptied glen when I can almost feel the physical presence of the dispossessed. And even if you can't feel the past then you can see signs of it all around you: the tumbled stones of the old black houses, the overgrown peat banks, the lazy beds on the rocky hillsides where potatoes and corn were coaxed out of the thin soil, the cart tracks over the moors, the remains of ruined mills and steadings. (Cooper, 1990: 4).*

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The aim of this part of my research was to attempt to investigate all aspects of the environment, past and present, through the medium of sound, and to interrogate it as a 'sonic archive'. My primary methodology was active listening, foregrounding the 'ear-lead' over the visual sense and through this listening practice I hoped to find out if past events can be said to leave sonic traces and, if so, how we can hear and interpret them.

*The way we think about the world is in no small way influenced by the senses we engage to appreciate this world, and in turn these senses have always already an ideological as well as a cultural function prior to us employing them. (Voegelin, 2010: xi).*

Sometimes this listening revealed things to me that I could not see. For example, the soundscape on Sunday morning in Stornoway<sup>15</sup> was unusual and unique. There was virtually no traffic. It was very quiet except for the ubiquitous background accompaniment of wind and the gulls, the very occasional car engine and the sounds of unseen people purposefully walking in high-heeled shoes, the sound resonating around the empty cobbled streets. After a certain amount of time all went silent until strains of hymn singing and sermonising in Gaelic and English floating around on the wind. It has been said that "there is no Sunday anywhere like the Sunday of Stornoway. Nor indeed is there religious observance elsewhere on such an impressive and enthusiastic scale" (Cooper, 1988: 13). This soundscape told me more about the Lewis observance of the Sabbath than any other mode of information possibly could. On another occasion, in Lochmaddy, the largest settlement in North Uist, the wind carried with it the cries of cows and sheep and the creaking and clattering of iron gates. Investigation revealed that a large pen full of animals was waiting to be ferried off the island for sale or slaughter.

At other times, listening revealed something very different from the past that I had read or heard about and reconstructed in my listening imagination. The soundscape at MacLennan's supermarket at Balivanich, Benbecula was a noisy mix of electronic bleeps, very loud background television, the hums of the freezer compartment and the occasional brief conversation exchange between shop worker and customer. This provided a sharp contrast with the quiet, calm atmosphere of the smaller shop at Arnol, Lewis and the extended, personal conversations between the customers and shop worker. However, both locations provided a much easier and convenient way of shopping than what I had previously heard described in interviews in the archive at Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre, Lochmaddy, North Uist and seen in archival photographs; namely the puffer boats, the early supply ships that islanders relied on for their supplies. Even now the islanders have to rely on the Caledonian MacBrayne ferries for most of their stock, and the schedule is frequently upset by bad weather. Each of the various ferry terminals on the Outer Hebrides has a particular soundtrack that accompanies the arrival and departure of the ferry; consisting of a mix in various portions of sea, vehicle engines, the rattle of the ferry ramp, animals being transported to the mainland, the conversation of foot passengers, crew announcements and the familiar 'ding-dong' sound that precedes them, the scrape of the ferries of different sizes on different types of embarkation points at different tidal situations, and so on.

Much of the time all I could hear was the wind, the rain and the seabirds, suggesting a landscape and environment that I imagined had changed very little sonically for a

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number of centuries. In general, the volume of this soundscape mocked any idea that empty or isolated meant silent. Sometimes on these occasions, I could actually see something extraordinary, a vista that told of past event or past customs, but still all I could hear was the wind, rain and seabirds, so I ended up talking into the microphone, describing what I could see, how I felt and what I could remember. At other times, I was forced to perform in order to make sounds, to animate things to make them sound, a little like a foley artist but working with the materials of the environment, moving in it, walking on different surfaces and engaging with it on a micro-level in order to try to identify sounds that might hold some significance to unlocking and revealing the past. Occasionally, the absence of sound pointed to past events such as when I was told that the inhabitants of Berneray missed the sound of the children playing in the school as, since the construction of the causeway to North Uist, which opened in 1998, the children could travel to school in North Uist daily, and the local Berneray school had closed.

These informed, performed and active listenings gave me a series of rich experiences and engagements with aspects of the environment. Much of the time, there was a dramatic contrast between what I could see and what I could hear, or between what I could see or hear and what I knew to be some kind of past reality. Alongside this listening activity, I was trying to record sounds I could hear.

### Recording the Outer Hebrides

Active listening can be a very powerful, surprising and revealing mode of understanding. Listening is, however, very different from the act of listening and making a sound recording at the same time. As composer, radio artist and sound ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp puts it:

*At the point at which the ear becomes disconnected from direct contact with the soundscape and suddenly hears everything the way the microphone "hears" and the headphones transmit, at that point the recordist wakes up to a type of new reality of the soundscape. The sounds are highlighted, the ears are alerted precisely because the sounds are on a recording.*

*The sounds are not only highlighted, but the whole experience feels to the recordist as if he or she is more intensely inside the soundscape, because the sound is closer to the ear and usually amplified. But in fact, the recordist is separated from the original direct aural contact with the soundscape, especially from the spatial realities of closeness and distance, from the ability to localize sound correctly.*

*In that contradiction, however, lies the seduction of the microphone: it feels like access, like closer contact, but it is in fact a separation, a schizophrenic situation. Soundscape recordists exist in their own sound bubble and hear the place in which they are, completely differently from everyone else in the same place. They are like foreigners or outsiders, no matter whether the place is their home or foreign territory. (1998: online)*

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So listening mediated by technology can be a magnifying experience for the sound recordist. I took a variety of sound recording equipment with me, but soon abandoned the larger and most conspicuous items on grounds of both weight when walking around, and size, particularly when talking to people or recording when people were present as I did not want to draw attention to myself nor intimidate people or interrupt their conversational flow with too much emphasis on the recording technology. For me, the balance for this kind of recording needs to be struck between quality, ease of use, portability and weight, and battery power. Although I had with me a semi-professional Tascam digital recorder and a large microphone I rarely used them, favouring instead my old Sony DAT Walkman and a pair of Soundman OKM binaural microphones<sup>16</sup> with a small Alesis digital handheld recorder as a back-up.

One of the distinct features of using sound as a method of recording as opposed to photography or video is that it is very difficult for the person recording to distance themselves from the artefact that they are creating, both theoretically and practically.

*Vision, by its very nature assumes a distance from the object... and this distance enables a detachment and objectivity that presents itself as truth. Seeing is believing... By contrast, hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard. (Voegelin, 2010: xii).*

Shooting a photograph, video or film involves having to distance yourself from the subject, having to focus and frame them. Sound, however, is not directional; sound is all around, and recording sound can only be done by being there inside the recording and as a result, often being part of that recording. Listening back to my recordings I find that I am audibly present, inseparable from the recording as so much of the time I can hear my breathing, my grunts and sighs. When I am interviewing people I can hear my too frequent interjections and laughter. Unfortunately, listening back to those recordings is an essentially reductive experience, often a disappointment for the recordist as well as for the listener. The acts of listening and of recording are essentially multisensory experiences: I am recording in the Outer Hebrides I can feel the wind on my face, I am cold, wet, a little tired and slightly hungry. The last time I visited this very spot was a decade or so ago, I was with a friend and am acutely aware of the differences between then and now, in our relationship, my age and status in the world, my mental state as well as the weather conditions. I am also aware that what I can see is the most beautiful view stretching all around me, but I know that on this spot in the past there was a large township that was full of people and industry. I have read about it and I have seen it in photographs, in my 'mind's ear' I try to hear it, to activate my auditory imagination, while still actively listening to what I can hear in the here and now. It is a rich experience calling all my senses as well as individual and collective memory into play.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold has stated that:

*the environment that we experience, know and move around in is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which we enter into it. The world we perceive is the same world, whatever path we take, and each of us perceives it as an undivided centre of activity and awareness... Sound in my view is neither mental or material, but a phenomenon of*

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*experience – that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves. (cited in Carlyle, 2007: 10)*

If this is true, how can artists hope to capture something of our embodied experience of the environment or place using tools peculiar to or serving only one of those sensory pathways? In other words – how can I hope to try to portray or communicate something of the environment through sound alone?

Voegelin puts forward a contrasting and more compelling argument:

*Every sensory interaction relates back to us not the object/phenomenon perceived, but that object/phenomenon filtered, shaped and produced by the sense employed in its perception... the senses employed are always already ideologically and aesthetically determined, bringing their own influence to perception, the perceptual object and the perceptual subject. (2010: 3)*

This suggests that sound has a different perspective to offer and through using sound both in its apprehension in the environment and in its use as a recorded artefact to disseminate information about sound by means of sound, can offer a new perspective and way of 'knowing' to others.

### Composing with the sounds of the Outer Hebrides

I returned from the Outer Hebrides with large amounts of sound recordings. These included atmospheres of specific places and more general environments, both internal and external, as well as interviews that I had conducted. There were individual sounds, some of which were re-activated by me and some 'found' incidents or occurrences. I also recorded monologues describing what I could see, what I was thinking, and what stories and memories came to mind. In addition, I had sections of archive recordings in English and Gaelic from the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh as well as from a host of community archives scattered throughout Ness, Lewis, Stornoway, Lochmaddy and South Uist, which provided a sonic link back to different times and different places. The recorded sound that I ended up with depended heavily on chance. In the archive, much of what I might have wanted to hear simply was not available, either because it did not exist or because it was in Gaelic with no translation and so was unavailable to me. When I was on the Outer Hebrides, I was at the mercy of the weather, and the availability and willingness of people to talk to me. Prior to starting to compose, I had to spend a lot of time reviewing and listening to my recordings, rejecting those that were unsuitable for technical reasons or just because on listening back they carried little sonic interest. During this process I organised the material into various themes.

As I have said before, my main aim in composing was to try to convey something of my sonic research and informed experience of the islands. For me, this involved finding a compositional balance somewhere between being able to recognise and 'place' or attribute sounds, and playing with their innate musicality and abstract qualities such as pitch, timbre, volume, duration, perspective and distance and sense of space. Once I have listened to, and organised my sound material into groups or themes, I worked with a variety of computer-based software to transform, combine and mix it together.

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The first piece that I made with the material collected in this project was 'On the Machair'. This is loosely woven around aspects of the crofting lifestyle, past and present. It starts on the *machair* (a Gaelic word that describes an extensive low-lying fertile plain that is one of the rarest habitat types in Europe. Almost half of all Scottish *machair* occurs in the Outer Hebrides) and in particular the *machair* around Sollas, a small crofting township in North Uist. There are references to the importance of the *machair* to supporting crofting lifestyles in terms of the plants, crops, animals and birds that can be found there (including a recording made one night in 2004 of a corncrake with sheep and an accordion player at a party on the beach far in the background). It refers to the kelp industry that, along with the herring industry, supported a population of 93,000 in 1841 (present population is around 26,000, about half the size of the seaside town of Hove). It then moves on to sheep, which largely replaced people on the *machair* after the clearances when thousands of families emigrated to Canada, New Zealand and Australia in the 19th Century due to a mixture of force famine, crop failure and the demise of the kelp industry. Part of the recording here is of a mobile sheep sale which travels around the islands visiting small townships. In 1849, 33 constables were sent from Oban to Sollas to stand by as a population of 603 was forcibly evicted. A plaque on the Sollas *machair* commemorates this and celebrates how all but one of the existing ten crofts have been occupied by the same families for the last century:

*Around us the Sollas landscape provides a heritage of ruined houses and fallen dykes, a poignant and permanent reminder of nineteenth century feudal oppression, clearance and emigration.*

The voices in 'On the Machair' are those of Donald MacSween of Ness, Harris as well as John and Mary MacLean from Berneray, recorded by Cathy Lane. The Gaelic voice is that of Lachlan MacQueen of North Uist, who is talking about the clearances around Sollas. Lachlan was recorded by D.R. MacDonald in 1974 for the oral history archive at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh.

'Tweed' is the second section of this ongoing 'Hebrides Suite'. Harris tweed is one of the most famous products of the Outer Hebrides. In order to be Harris tweed, the cloth must be woven at home by hand. In the past, islanders also dyed and spun the wool at home, but more recently, this has been done by the mills. In 1985 there were three big mills on Lewis employing about 450 people. The mills scour, dye and dry the wool, which is bought in from the mainland, before converting it into yarn for weaving. In 1985, there were 650 weavers in the islands. More recently, *Tweed*, a three-part BBC television documentary screened in September 2009<sup>17</sup>, which followed the recent trials and tribulations of the Harris tweed industry between 2006 and 2008, put the number of weavers at 120.

The voices and recordings in 'Tweed' were recorded over a few visits to the islands at different times and places. The piece attempts to weave together different voices and atmospheres to build up a sonic impression of, or *fantasie* on, the workings and the people involved in an industry in a specific time and place. The first voice, of weaver Catherine Campbell, was recorded in her weaving shed and shop in Plocrapool, on the east coast of Harris. She tells a little of the history of Harris tweed, demonstrates the workings of her loom and also talks about her aunt, the famous weaver Marion Campbel, who received the British Empire Medal (BEM) from the Queen. She is proud of her independent status as a weaver who "doesn't work for the mill" but works for herself. The next voice heard was recorded in a weaving shed near Callinish on Lewis in

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1998 as the weaver tried to show me and my friend how to use the Hattersley loom. Threaded in are various atmospheres, voices and mechanical sounds from the mill at Shawbost, Lewis recorded in 2006 just as it was about to be sold. Soon after these recordings were made, the mill closed down. Its subsequent fortunes are part of the subject matter of the BBC *Tweed* series. As well as the various machines for washing, drying, dyeing and spinning the yarn, we hear voices explaining various processes concerned with the production of the dyed and spun yarn. The weavers are heard explaining some of the physical elements of weaving, many of which form spatial templates for the treatment of the recorded material in the composition.

My intention in composing with these sounds has been to try to communicate something of my experiences of, and my feelings for, the Outer Hebrides through the medium of sound. In order to do this, I have tried to utilise various devices to fill in some of the 'missing' aspects of my embodied experience of collecting and gathering and researching and cycling and walking and visiting and talking and meeting and being there. This kind of compositional work belongs to the overall genre of soundscape studies.

*A soundscape is an environment of sound (or sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment. (Truax, cited in EARS, 2009: online)*

This includes what we may call 'soundscape composition'. This refers to

*a kind of electroacoustic work, much of which was initiated by members of the World Soundscape Project (WSP) at Simon Fraser University. Environmental sound recordings form both the source material and also inform the work at all its structural levels in the sense that the original context and associations of the material play a significant role in its creation and reception.*

*In other words, soundscape composition is context embedded, and even though it may incorporate seemingly abstract material from time to time, the piece never loses sight of what it is 'about'... Thus, the real goal of the soundscape composition is the re-integration of the listener with the environment in a balanced ecological relationship. (EARS, 2009, online)*

I like to think of what I am trying to do as 'docu-music' (the origin is unclear). Docu-music can be defined as works using sound materials which have recognisable real world associations and roots, such as spoken word, field recordings and other recognisable sounds, within a musical structure. The intention of docu-music is to build up a sense of meaning, history and place through sonic association in order to relate to the world outside the composition.

## Conclusion

This research was undertaken without any clear idea of what would be found or what the answer would be to the primary research question – namely, can past events be said to leave sonic traces and, if so, how we can hear and interpret them? The answers

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are many and encompass the full range of possibilities between 'yes' and 'no'. Some sounds, such as those of a large population of people scraping by and living off the land, are gone forever, but their traces remain in the voices, language, names and stories of their descendants. Many of the materials that they worked with, such as the bent grass and the peat, can still be sonically activated. The society has changed in many ways, but it is still significantly different from many other societies to be found in the British Isles by virtue of its unique culture, geography and location. Finding sound both in the archive and in the 'field' provided me with the opportunity for a close and detailed engagement with the islands. I am still working with the material, and through that I am still in the process of drawing conclusions through both the creative reworking and composing with the material and listening, with an audience, to the works produced.

Writing about 'On the Machair', Voegelin has written:

*The sense I make strides between this listening to the sonic material and the negotiation of the island's existence as a known, historical and geographical fact. The notion of island, of Scotland, people, cows, goats and hard work, not realized as an imminent outcome but teased out and produced in my contingent and subjective listening. (2010: 23)*

It seems that this ear-led research imparts something to others as well as to myself. Like sound, the knowledge seems to be ephemeral and difficult to pin down exactly, but it holds up the possibility of offering a different way of 'knowing'.<sup>18</sup>

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Practice-led research is defined by the British Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) as "research where practice is an integral component and/or where it theorises contemporary practice in order to then inform your own individual practice." A useful range of links to articles and current thinking on this subject is available at: <http://artsresearch.brighton.ac.uk/links/practice-led> – accessed October 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Tenant farmers who owned no land.

<sup>3</sup> One such battle took place in Sollas, North Uist in 1849.

<sup>4</sup> A traditional type of house that was common in Highland Scotland, the Hebrides, Ireland and areas of Gaelic settlement in Nova Scotia. There are many ruined blackhouses in the Outer Hebrides, and some restored for habitation and as holiday accommodation. There is a restored blackhouse village in Garenin, Lewis.

<sup>5</sup> Guising is a Scottish tradition that includes dressing up and visiting door to door around Halloween time.

<sup>6</sup> Bent grass is horsehair and hay made into rope.

<sup>7</sup> Making a special wicker basket to carry lobsters or peat, often on horse- or donkey-back.

<sup>8</sup> Waulking is the final process of shrinking the woven woollen cloth. It is often done by groups of women and special waulking songs can accompany the job. For more information and songs, see Bennett (2006).

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<sup>9</sup> St Kilda is the remotest part of the British Isles and the outermost island of the Outer Hebrides. The last inhabitants left in 1930.

<sup>10</sup> Seabirds were an essential part of the diet of Scotland in the past. Ness, Lewis still has an annual cull of gannet (*guga*) from the small island of Sgula Sgeir (Gannet Rock):

*one of the most inhospitable places on earth. A storm-lashed rock, barely half a mile long and ringed by cliffs 200 feet high... Yet every year the men of Ness make the arduous journey from Lewis to Sula Sgeir to gather the strangest harvest. Here, each summer, they risk their lives to hunt the gugas – fat young gannets which are pickled in salt to be eaten during the winter... Despite the hazards, it has become a ritual of hardship and endurance, a way in which the men of Ness can keep in touch with their Gaelic roots.* (Sinclair, 1996: 55-56).

<sup>11</sup> The remains of a Norwegian-built whaling station, later bought by Lord Leverhulme, can still be seen at Bunavoneadar, Harris.

<sup>12</sup> Lazybeds are a traditional method of growing crops (mainly potatoes) in small patches of soil fertilised with seaweed.

<sup>13</sup> Dulse is a type of seaweed.

<sup>14</sup> A simple early spout lamp burning fish oil or other fat.

<sup>15</sup> Stornoway is the main town of Lewis and the largest town in the Outer Hebrides with a population of 6,000 inhabitants.

<sup>16</sup> Binaural microphones record a stereo signal using the 'dummy head technique' and claim to be able to record in very much the same way as the ears hear. Recordings made with binaural microphones are, as a result, best listened to on headphones.

<sup>17</sup> More information about this series can be found at:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mr0n9> - accessed October 2010

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