Bernd Herzogenrath

A ‘Meteorology of Sound’: Composing Nature in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Is there a ‘meteorology of sound’? What is the ‘weather of music?’ In seminal works of Classical music which refer to the seasons [Schumann’s Symphony No 1 (“Frühling” | “Spring”), Gershwin’s “Summertime,” or Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons], and or to the weather, such as Beethoven’s Symphony No 6 (“Pastorale” | “The Pastoral Symphony”), with its fourth movement ‘Thunderstorm,’ composers were primarily concerned with an acoustic/musical translation of subjective sense perceptions, i.e., with a representation of nature and natural forces. In this article, however, I am more interested in the question if there is a connection between nature, weather and music beyond representation, if weather phenomena themselves can be music, and if music itself can be ‘meteorological.’ My first thesis is the following: whereas the composers of the 18th and 19th centuries were mainly interested in the representation of the subjective effects of weather phenomena, modern avant-garde composers more and more focus on the reproduction of the processes and dynamics of the weather as a system ‘on the edge of chaos.’

My second thesis is related to the first, but more specific in terms of space and time: a particular American modernist tradition in music from Charles Ives via John Cage to John Luther Adams not only starts with the writings of Henry David Thoreau – Thoreau already provides an aesthetics of music, the radicalism of which is only being followed up today.¹

Let me first point out the particularity of Thoreau’s musical aesthetics and ‘musical ecology.’ In 1851, Thoreau notes an acoustic experience in his journals that reveals his particular sensibility to the sonic environment:

Yesterday and to-day the stronger winds of autumn have begun to blow, and the telegraph harp has sounded loudly […] the tone varying with the tension of different parts of the wire. The sound proceeds from near the posts, where the vibration is apparently more rapid (Journal III: 11).

Far from being an isolated case, Thoreau focuses on the ‘sound of nature’ – and in particular the ‘sound of the weather’ – in various other entries in his journals: “Nature makes no noise. The howling storm, the rustling leaf, the pattering rain are no disturbance, there is an essential and unexplored harmony in them” (Journal I: 12). Thoreau is exploring the audible world like a

¹ And it should be noted that this radicalism makes Thoreau a patron saint not only of music, but also of ecology.
sound-archaeologist, carefully distinguishing ‘sound’ from ‘music.’ “now I see the beauty and full meaning of that word ‘sound.’ Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects, the booming of ice […] which indicates her sound state” (Journal I: 226-7). What Thoreau is pointing at is the fact that nature itself produces what one today might call ‘ambient music,’ or ‘ambient sound.’ Thoreau’s sensitivity for environmental sounds heralds an avant-garde aesthetic in music that starts with the work of Charles Ives. That Ives, and Cage and Adams as well, were effectively influenced by Thoreau is beyond question – see the work of Frank Mehring or Christopher Shultis. However, I am interested more in the particular inspirations these composers draw from Thoreau’s aesthetics, and how they made this inspiration fruitful for their own aesthetics. Let me begin with Ives’s reading of Thoreau and Ives’s Weather of Music as Metaphor.

Charles Ives – The ‘Weather of Music’ as Metaphor

Far from the madding crowds, metropolises and music centers of the world, against every ‘trend’ in late 19th Century Classical music, Ives composed his music in Danbury, Connecticut, a music that was intimately related to New England Transcendentalism, a literary-philosophical ‘movement’ that can be understood both as a secular brand of American Puritanism, and as ‘American Romanticism,’ since it drew its inspiration from that of which America had in abundance – Nature (with a capital N). American Transcendentalism is inextricably linked with the names Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau. While Emerson’s metaphysical and idealistic [in the sense of a Hegelian Idealism] brand of Transcendentalism made him the philosophical spokesman of the movement, his disciple Thoreau followed a much more materialist and ‘physical’ philosophy, without however completely casting off the Emersonian Metaphysics. This seemingly small difference in the initial conditions will have important effects, since Thoreau’s ambivalence in this matter will result in the contrasting readings of his work by Ives and Cage respectively.

Ives was a dyed-in-the-wool Transcendentalist, who promoted Thoreau to private patron saint for his own conception of music. In an essay on Thoreau, Ives emphasizes that “if there shall be a program for our music, let it follow [Thoreau’s] thought on an autumn day of Indian summer at Walden …” (Essays 67). In these 1920 Essays Before a Sonata, which Ives conceived as a literary counterpart to his Piano Sonata No 2 (“Concord”-Sonata), Ives sum-

---

2 See also Thoreau’s essay “Walking” and its concept of “wildness.” ‘Sound’ can be understood as ‘wildness’ with regard to ‘music’ [as sound organized by a traditional composer] – the unformed, unintended, untamed in comparison to John Sullivan Dwight’s canonization in Thoreau’s time of European Classical Music [and in particular the compositions of Beethoven] as the paradigm for a future American Music.
marizes his understanding of the central idea of Emersonian Transcendentalism, which is also the guiding tenet of his own work:

Is it not this courageous universalism that gives conviction to [Emerson’s] prophecy, and that makes his symphonies of revelation begin and end with nothing but the strength and beauty of innate goodness in man, in Nature and in God – the greatest and most inspiring theme of Concord Transcendental philosophy … ? (Esays 35)

If Ives’s phrase “symphonies of revelation” refers to both Emerson’s visionary power and the ‘musicality’ of his oratorical prose, Ives also finds these very qualities in Thoreau’s writings:

Thoreau was a great musician, not because he played the flute but because he did not have to go to Boston to hear ‘The Symphony.’ The rhythm of his prose […] would determine his value as a composer. He was divinely conscious of the enthusiasm of Nature, the emotion of her rhythms, and the harmony of her solitude. (Esays 51)

The reason for Ives’s reference to both Emerson and Thoreau can be found in the observation that Ives reads Thoreau’s ‘materialist’ sound-aesthetics on the foil of Emerson’s Idealism, according to which nature is the expression (and effect) of reason: “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (“Nature” 24). As has been pointed out, in Emerson’s work, the “subject’s triumph over nature” takes center stage (see Schulz 117). Defining intuition and imagination as primary sources of a creative comprehension of Truth, for Emerson, the creative subject attains a Divine status because of its ability to read and translate the metaphoricity of nature – “Whoever creates is God” (Journals V: 341).

Thoreau, in contrast, stresses the material and sensual aspects of nature – “We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life […]. Is not Nature […] that of which she is commonly taken to be a symbol merely?” (A Week 307). Thoreau does not read nature like Emerson does, he does not interpret nature according to an external spiritual principle – such a principle, because of nature’s manifoldness, is immanent to it. For Thoreau, nature and its ‘music’ are not only “God’s voice, the divine breath audible” (Journal I: 154), but also – and maybe even first and foremost – “the sound of circulation in nature’s veins” (Journal I: 251). It is in this stress on nature as sensuous experience and materiality that Thoreau ‘deviates’ from Emerson. Thoreau focuses on [the music of] nature as a material, physical process, not as an Emersonian emblem of reason: “The very globe continually transcends and translates itself. […] The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth” (Walden 306-7). Thoreau understands “transcending” as a “physical process” – as the dynamics of metamorphosis, continuous change – as LIFE.

For Emerson, in contrast, nature is the manifestation of the spirit, of reason, and the ‘music of nature’ is spirit | reason expressing itself, is thus pure transcendence, pure metaphysics.
Even if Ives is following Thoreau in his music aesthetics and makes the sonority of the world his main principle, he is mainly interested in the sonority of the human world, which he does not reproduce, but represent, and which he generates from various quotations and samples taken from European Classical music and American popular tunes and liturgical music. Ives does not only compose 'nature,' but also complex cityscapes/soundscapes, impressions of man’s urban 'second nature.'

In a similar vein, his Holidays Symphony, according to Ives, paints “pictures in music of common events in the lives of common people” (Memos 97-8), and his hymns “represent the sternness and strength and austerity of the Puritan character” (Memos 39). With Ives transferring the Emersonian Transcendentalism’s ‘correspondence’ of spirit and nature to the realm of music, his ‘weather of music’ always coagulates into a representation, that is, a sonic picture of the weather – e.g. in the Holidays Symphony to an acoustic “picture of the dismal, bleak, cold weather of a February night near Fairfield” (Memos 96), with the weather itself in turn “reflecting the sternness of the Puritan’s fibre” (Memos 96n1).

Thus, even if Ives explicitly refers to Thoreau, his relation to Thoreau, with all of Ives’s interest in experimental soundscapes, is a one-sided and single-minded affair at most. For Ives, listener and composer are aural equivalents to Emerson’s almighty and visual me – like with Emerson, music for Ives is not only “purely a symbol of a mental concept” (“Correspondence” 115), but the almost mystical revelation of the Emersonian Over-Soul, with the composer’s role matching the one of Emerson’s Poet:

> For Poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings […] The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts though imperfect, become the songs of the nations. (“The Poet” 449)

Like Emerson, Ives stresses the need for representation and translation of those “primal warblings,” since he, notwithstanding his acceptance of ‘sounds,’ always emphasizes the need of a ‘subjective corrective’ to bring out about the sounds’ “ethereal quality” (“Music and Its Future” 192). For Thoreau, however, the ‘music of nature’ needs and requires no translation:

> This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains” (Journal II: 307). Thoreau lets the sounds rest and dwell in their semantic indeterminacy, focusing on “the language which all things and events speak without metaphor” (Walden 11) instead. Ives, in privileging the ‘idea’ over the ‘senses,’ does ultimately not follow Thoreau in his deviation from [and maybe even re-conceptualization of] Emerson’s idealistic Tran-

---

3 For the theory of correspondence, see e.g. Emerson’s “Nature.”
4 See also: “the music’ as being the character of the idea or spirit, quite apart from its embodiment in sound” (John Kirkpatrick’s footnote in Ives’s Memos 242).
A ‘Meteorology of Sound’

sce

John Cage – The ‘Weather of Music’ as Mapping

“[I]s not all music program music? Is not […] music […] representative in its essence?” (Essays 4). Cage would have definitively answered Ives’s rhetorical question with a firm ‘No!’ Cage deviates from Ives in that he precisely puts Thoreau’s shift of emphasis towards nature’s materiality center stage in his own aesthetics. Cage came across Thoreau’s Journals for the first time in 1967, and from that point made Thoreau not only the addressee of numerous compositions, but his [retroactive] muse: “Reading Thoreau’s Journal, I discover any idea I’ve ever had worth its salt” (“Diary” 18). One of the challenging ideas that Cage saw already prefigured in Thoreau is a non-dualistic conception of the world that counters Emerson’s doctrine of the ‘metaphoricity of nature’ and the ‘partitioning of the world’ into Me and not-me with a fundamental co-existence of both spheres – according to Thoreau, “[a]ll beauty, all music, all delight springs from apparent dualism but real unity” (Journal I: 340). Beauty [and music] for Thoreau and Cage are explicitly not Hegel’s “idea made real in the sensuous” (284) – whereas Emerson and Ives would certainly have embraced the Hegelian concept. Nature, for Thoreau and Cage, is not a function of the idea, perceptions are not interpretations of the world, but part of that world. This notion completely contradicts both the Idealism inherent to Emerson’s Transcendentalism and its claim that the subject imposes its power on matter. If Emerson claims that “the poet conforms things to his thoughts […] and impresses his being thereon” (“Nature” 34), that the creative subject in-forms matter in the first place, then for Thoreau, in contrast, “[t]he earth I tread on is not a dead inert mass. It is a body, has a spirit” (Journal II: 165). With regard to the “telegraph harp” being ‘played’ by the weather, the resulting music of which he claimed to be “the most glorious music I ever heard” (Journal III: 219), Thoreau states: “the finest uses of things are accidental. Mr. Morse did not invent this music” (Journal III: 220). Cage finds in Thoreau thus both the focus on materiality of nature,

5 Betty E. Chmaj calls Ives the “Emerson of American music” (396). On the relation Ives | Emerson, see also Shultis.

6 Thoreau goes even further and envisions the co-existence of the telegraph harp with the greater cycle of nature: “What must the birds and beasts think where it passes through woods, who heard only the squeaking of trees before! I should think that these strains would get into their music at last. Will not the mockingbird be heard one day inserting this strain in his medley?” (Journal III: 219). There is a loud and clear ‘Yes!’ to Thoreau’s
which Ives still had ‘subjectified’ into human and symbolic music, and the accidental, which Ives always had attempted to control. It is exactly these parameters that Cage turns into the center of his compositions. Against the traditional composer’s attempt at control – or: authorial intention – Cage envisions “a composing of sounds within a universe predicated upon the sounds themselves rather than the mind which can envisage their coming into being” (Silence 27-8). In his absolute reduction of ‘subjective control’ and his valorization of ‘sound’ Cage combines two other maxims of Thoreau: “the music is not in the tune; it is in the sound” (Journal IV: 144), and “[t]he peculiarity of a work of genius is the absence of the speaker from his speech. He is but the medium” (Journal III: 236). The radical difference in Ives’s and Cage’s reference to Thoreau can be illustrated by recourse to a passage from Walden:

Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord bell, when the wind was favorable […]. At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. (Walden 123)

Ives repeatedly quotes this passage and always emphasizes the ‘spiritualizing effect’ of the sound described by Thoreau – the symbolic meaning of the distant church bells, a “transcendental tune” (Essays 69), a mere echo of a more divine ‘sphere music.’ Cage, in contrast, combines Thoreau’s ‘auditory observation’ with his remark of the accidental Aeolian music of the telegraph harp. This merging of sound and indeterminacy becomes his “Music for Carillon,” a composition for chimes, for which Cage ‘translates’ nature ‘without metaphor,’ by transferring the natural patterns of the wood’s grain into musical notation. By drawing stave-lines onto the wood, Cage lets the musician ‘read’ the knotholes and grain patterns as notes – in a similar way, in “Music for Piano,” Cage uses the material irregularities of a sheet of paper to determine the position of notes.

Thoreau’s preference for sounds and for the accidental makes him a progenitor of a decidedly avant-garde musical practice in Cage’s eyes, a practice which does away with the individual as locus and agency of control. This also means that this aesthetics does not deal with the representation of affectations and sensations anymore, but with the reproduction of the dynamics of natural processes. Thus Cage does not only state the importance of sounds [and silence] for him as a composer, but claims much more fundamentally: “the function of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation” (Silence 194). Here, I argue, music becomes ‘meteorological,’ since nature operates according to extremely complex dynamics, probabilities and improbabilities – just like the weather! What is fascinating about the weather is not just the power of its atmospheric special effects, the combined LucasArts™ of thunder and lightning, but more so the fact that the weather is a highly complex, dynamic, open, and thus in the long run unpredictable and question – today’s birds have integrated radio jingles and cell phone ring tones in their song.
uncontrollable system of forces and intensities. For Cage’s aesthetics and compositional practice, this means that they reveal a line of flight, a vector “away from ideas of order towards no ideas of order” (Silence 20), with the stress being on ideas of order, that is, a mental order as against a ‘natural order’ with its own ‘manners of operation.’

Against the Emersonian stress on the representation [and control] of nature by the individual, Thoreau and Cage emphasize perception as a practice [of both art and life]. According to Chris Shultis, Cage and Ives posit “the two poles of self ([…] the coexisting and controlling) in American experimental music, connecting contemporary concerns to a nineteenth-century past” (xviii), two poles already prefigured in Thoreau and Emerson. The compositional complexity of Ives’s work is due to an intertextual interweaving of ‘samples of culture’ that are ultimately [re]inscribed in a higher [transcendent] unity. David Nicholls has poignantly referred to it as an “organized chaos” (67). For Cage, it is a “purposeless play” that is [at] the ‘heart’ of life and art:

This play […] is an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and desires out the way and lets it act of its own accord. (Silence 12)

It is that attitude in Thoreau to “the very life we’re living” that makes him such an inspiration for Cage: “Thoreau only wanted one thing: to see and hear the world around him […]. [H]e lets things speak and write as they are’ (For the Birds 233-4). Instead of ‘painting’ symbolic sonic pictures, Cage’s compositions rather construct maps and charts, that is, topographies of natural processes. It is thus more than a coincidence that the motif of the map is so important in Cage’s work – see on the one hand his many compositions based on atlases or celestial charts, such as Atlas Eclipticalis, or the Etudes Australes and the Etudes Boreales, and on the other hand Cage’s various graphic notations. Cage’s mapping of the ‘weather of music’ finds its maybe most direct and ‘literal’ reflection in his Lecture on the Weather. In this composition, passages from Thoreau’s journals (determined by chance operations) read simultaneously by various speakers in tempi of their own choice, and field recordings of wind, rain, and thunder condensate into a commentary on the political climate of the USA in the mid-1970s. In a performance of Lecture on the Weather at the Cage-Fest in Strathmore, Maryland, on May 5, 1989,

doors were open to the outside where a storm began to be audible and visible […]. [T]his had the interesting effect of eradicating the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ – the meteorological display over Strathmore Hall was continuous with what was going on in the room where Cage’s more gentle storm included the weather of predetermined and coincidental conjunctions of sound and voice variables. (Retallack 248)

The performance in fact “is not about weather; it is weather” (Perloff 25).
Cage’s ‘weather of music’ thus can be understood as an assemblage of sonic intensities and natural processes – the compositions become meteorological systems themselves. These systems, however, are, as Cage himself admits and regrets, still ‘framed’ – even silence has the precise temporal coordinates of 4:33. And this is one of the decisive differences between Cage and the sound installations of John Luther Adams that I will focus on now, installations that aim at reproducing the ‘weather of music’ as a dynamic ecosystem.

John Luther Adams – The ‘Weather of Music’ as Ecosystem

As Gigliola Nocera has emphasized, the living and working conditions of Ives and Cage were comparable to Thoreau’s isolation at Walden Pond. Ives was working far off the ‘art centers’ in Danbury, Connecticut, and Cage in Stony Point, in New York State (see Nocera 356). Isolation is an even bigger issue with the composer John Luther Adams,7 who lives and works in Fairbanks, Alaska, approx. 125 miles south of the Arctic. Adams’s work is highly influenced by his environment – from his early works onwards he has always pointed out that he wants his music to be understood as an interaction with nature, as a site-specific “contact” with the environment that he calls “sonic geography” (“Resonance of Place” 8).

Adams’s sonic geography includes a cycle called songbirdsongs (1974-1980), consisting of various imitations of Alaskan birds reminiscent of Olivier Messiaen’s Catalogues d’oiseaux. Although in the compositional process and the transcription Adams brings birdsong to a ‘human scale’ in terms of tempo, modulation, pitch, etc., he conceptualizes the different melodies as a ‘toolkit,’ so that during the performance, an ever-new aggregation of phrases and motifs comes into existence, an open system, indeterminate in combination, length, intonation, tempi, etc. Earth and the Great Weather (1990-1993), an evening-long piece – or opera – consisting of field recordings of wind, melting glaciers, and thunder in combination with ritual drumming and chants of the Alaskan indigenous people, was “conceived as a journey through the physical, cultural and spiritual landscapes of the Arctic” (“Sonic Geography”).

In a further step, Adams combined his ‘sonic geography’ with the concept of what he calls” sonic geometry” (“Strange and Sacred Noise” 143). Adams is more and more interested in the ‘noisier’ sounds of nature and refers to findings of Chaos Theory and Fractal Geometry in order to find sonic equivalents for nature’s modus operandi. Strange and Sacred Noise (1991-1997) is an example of this approach.8

---

7 Adams, it has to be noted, is also an environmental activist and founder of Alaska’s Green Party. Mitchell Morris thus dubs Adams a “Green’ composer” (131).
8 Strange and Sacred Noise is a concert-length cycle of six movements for percussion quartet. Its first and last movements (“[…] dust into dust […]” and “[…] and dust rising
To date, the culmination of Adams’s sonic geography/geometry has been his recent project *The Place Where You Go To Listen*, the title of which refers to an Inuit legend according to which the shamans hear the wisdom of the world in [and get their knowledge from] the whisper of the wind and the murmur of the waves. Adams aims at the realization of a “musical ecosystem [...] A work of art [...] that is directly connected to the real world in which we live and resonates sympathetically with that world and with the forces of nature” (Mayer “Northern Exposure”). Adams not only imitates nature in its manner of operation, as Cage does, he taps into nature’s dynamic processes themselves for the generation of sound and light. Adams developed this project in close collaboration with geologists and physicists – in this installation, real time data from meteorological stations all over Alaska and from the five stations of the Alaska Earthquake Information Center are collected, coordinated, and made audible through pink noise filters. As Curt Szuberla, one of the physicists involved in the project, explains, “[t]he strings and bells and drumheads are plucked, bashed and banged based on the geophysical data streams. And the geophysical data streams [...] are the fingers and mallets and bells that hit things and make things sound” (Mayer *Living on Earth*). *The Place Where You Go To Listen* is a permanent installation at the *Museum of the North* in Fairbanks, where sound and light are generated in real time through data processing of the day and night rhythms, the rhythm of the seasons, of the moon phases, the weather conditions, and the seismic flows of the magnetic field of the Earth – nature itself, as well as the music it produces, operates according to its own times and speeds [and slownesses]. Hours, even days [and more] might pass between perceivable seismic changes or changes in the magnetic field of the Earth.

*The Place Where You Go To Listen* focuses on nature as process and event – in an almost Stoic emphasis on becoming versus being, Adams privileges time-sensitive dynamics, not clear-cut states. Adams’s installation goes further in the direction of the event than Ives and even Cage – although these two composers had also already pondered the conflict between the processuality of nature, and the means of art. Ives asked himself:

[... ] are based on the Cantor set and Cantor dust (the two-dimensional version of the Cantor set). These fractals model the behavior of electrical noise, which Adams takes as a diagram for the percussion set to explore “the dynamic form of the Cantor dust, whereby in an infinite process, line segments are divided into two segments by the removal of their middle third” (Feisst, “Music as Place”). See also (Feisst “Klanggeographie – Klanggeometrie”).
A painter paints a sunset – can he paint the setting sun? [...] [Is] [t]here [...] an analogy [...] between both the state and power of artistic perceptions and the law of perpetual change, that ever-flowing stream, partly biological, partly cosmic, ever going on in ourselves, in nature, in all life? (Essays 71)

Ives tried to master this problematics by way of the ever increasing complexification of his compositorial means. Cage also emphasized that he did not think it correct to say ‘the world as it is’:

it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes! It doesn’t wait for us to change [...], it is more mobile than you can imagine. You’re getting closer to this reality when you say as it ‘presents itself;’ that means that it is not there, existing as an object. The world, the real is not an object. It is a process. (For the Birds 80)

But – Ives was still the subject in control of chaos, and Cage, in spite of all indeterminacy, regretted that he was still creating ‘clear-cut’ objects. Adams solves this problem by leaving the executing | processing energy to the processual forces of nature itself. Music and environment thus become an ecosystem of a dynamics of acoustic and optic resonances interacting in | with an environment in constant flux. ‘Music’ in this sense thus for Adams becomes something entirely different than a ‘means’ of human communication about an external world:

If music grounded in tone is a means of sending messages to the world, then music grounded in noise is a means of receiving messages from the world. [...] As we listen carefully to noise, the whole world becomes music. Rather than a vehicle for self-expression, music becomes a mode of awareness. (“Ecology of Music”)

Thus, The Place Where You Go To Listen leaves the conceptualization of a music about nature, of music as a means of the representation of nature and landscape, on which e.g. Ives still relied, and creates music as a part of nature, as coextensive with the environment: “Through attentive and sustained listening to the resonances of this place, I hope to make music which belongs here, somewhat like the plants and the birds” (Adams “Resonance of Place” 8).

Even more direct than Cage, Adams emphasizes nature’s “manner of operation” in not only taking them as a model, but by directly ‘accessing’ and relating to the becoming of a site-specific environment and creating works that are this relation – a music of place, of a place where you go to listen. Adams explicitly refers to Thoreau in his work

Thoreau was a tremendous source of inspiration for me. [...] There is a certain aspiration to transcendence in my work. But, as with Thoreau, it’s a transcendence that rises not from religion, rather from deep within the Earth. (email correspondence)

Adams is clearly indebted to Thoreau’s sound aesthetics - even more so, I argue, than Ives’s or even Cage’s work. Like for Thoreau, for Adams music already is part of the environment. Nature has no need to be translated or represented, nature and the environment already sound, already express themselves. In Walden, Thoreau writes that “making the yellow soil express its
summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass – this was my daily work” (Walden 157). If Thoreau calls this ‘natural expression’ by the name of “saying,” he is evoking a correspondence between ‘expression’ and the ‘production’ of nature – a correspondence that goes far beyond the level of representation. The ‘expression’ of nature on the side of ‘production’ arrives in the subject as an ‘impression,’ so that from the perspective of culture, what we call representation is already rooted in nature – “every word is rooted in the soil, is indeed flowery and verdurous” (Thoreau, Journal I: 386).

“A history of music would be like […] the history of gravitation” – with regard to Adams’s physico-musical ecosystem, this sentence perfectly makes sense as a postmodern credo of New Music. However, this sentence is Thoreau’s (Journal I: 325) – and here we have come full circle, to Walden Pond, where more than 150 years ago, Thoreau was hearing an ecology of music, that only today is being realized.9

---

Works Cited


---. “Music as Place, Place as Music. The Sonic Geography of John Luther Adams.” (unpublished manuscript).


---. “Correspondence with Clifton Joseph Furness, July 24 1923.” Ives Collection, Yale University.

---. Living On Earth. Radio Interview with Curt Szuberla et. al., 28 March 2009 <www.loe.org/shows/segments.htm?programID=06-P13-00016&segmentID=5>


