

Soaring Echoes

by Susan Snodgrass

I've been trying to create an art form that will let other people discover the magic in listening.

Listening is a creative act where the listener makes the music. –Bill Fontana¹

Is music just sounds? –John Cage

Soaring Echoes, a new sonic sculpture created by Bill Fontana for the Pritzker Pavilion at Chicago's Millennium Park, dislocates then relocates the viewer within its host environment, transforming perceptions of time and space. Pritzker Pavilion, an outdoor music bandshell designed by Frank Gehry, is the centerpiece of Millennium Park, part of Grant Park, more than 300 acres of public park land bordered by Lake Michigan to the east and by Chicago's famed architectural skyline to the west. Using the pavilion's existing sound system, a steel trellis equipped with 102 loud speakers that arcs high above Millennium Park's Great Lawn, the artist has composed a series of soundscapes that expands the act of listening while reframing our everyday experience of the city.

Conceived in seven movements, *Soaring Echoes* is composed from field recordings of sounds indigenous to both the city's urban and natural environments—from the rhythms of its public transportation systems to the underwater melodies of Lake Michigan and the Chicago River—in addition to recordings from the artist's sound archive. In the 64-channel mix *Song Lines*, songs of warbling birds recorded in various wetlands in and around Chicago, as well as habitats in the northeast, soar back and forth across the air in a wave that suggests the motion of flight. Multidirectional kinds of movement are experienced in the elusive *Wind Phase*, which broadcasts high-resolution recordings of several wind turbines and the hum of cars passing over the Columbus Avenue bridge at different levels of the sound system. These kinetic mixes contrast with more textural pieces that employ human



ABOVE Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park at the time of installation for *Soaring Echoes*
Photo: Bill Fontana

voices to address, for example, notions of collectivity and commerce, as in *Public Calls* that layers the roaring cheers of fans at a baseball game and traders' calls during the Open Outcry at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

The movement *Creation Story* is recast from a previous recording of Louise Anderson, an African-American storyteller and former slave from North Carolina, who spins her own account of Adam and Eve. Fontana edits her story into a series of words and phrases: *Primal. What is it? What's wrong with you? Stop worrying!* When overlaid they form a spiritual scat that echoes across the park, a fragmentary, disembodied tale that transcends the specifics of place and remaps the narratives of creation and race.

Despite his rich source material and the elaborate setups used for his recordings, Fontana refers to the resultant sounds as “found sounds” or “found music,” a concept based on Marcel Duchamp's idea of the readymade. “Influenced by Duchamp's strategy of the found object,” says Fontana, “I began to realize that the relocation of an ambient sound source within a new context would alter radically

the acoustic meaning of the ambient sound source. I conceived such relocations in sculptural terms because ambient sounds are sculptural in the way they belong to a particular place. To make art out of an ambient sound, the act of placing this sound would have considerable aesthetic importance.”²

The artist terms this act of relocation “resounding,” a transformation that not only includes the transferring of an ambient sound from its original source to another context but also awakens the listener’s awareness of the sound’s new presence. “[T]he idea of resounding is that someone ‘gets’ the sound,” says Fontana.³ Thus the listener plays an integral role—that of listening and re-imagining—in creating the work’s meaning.

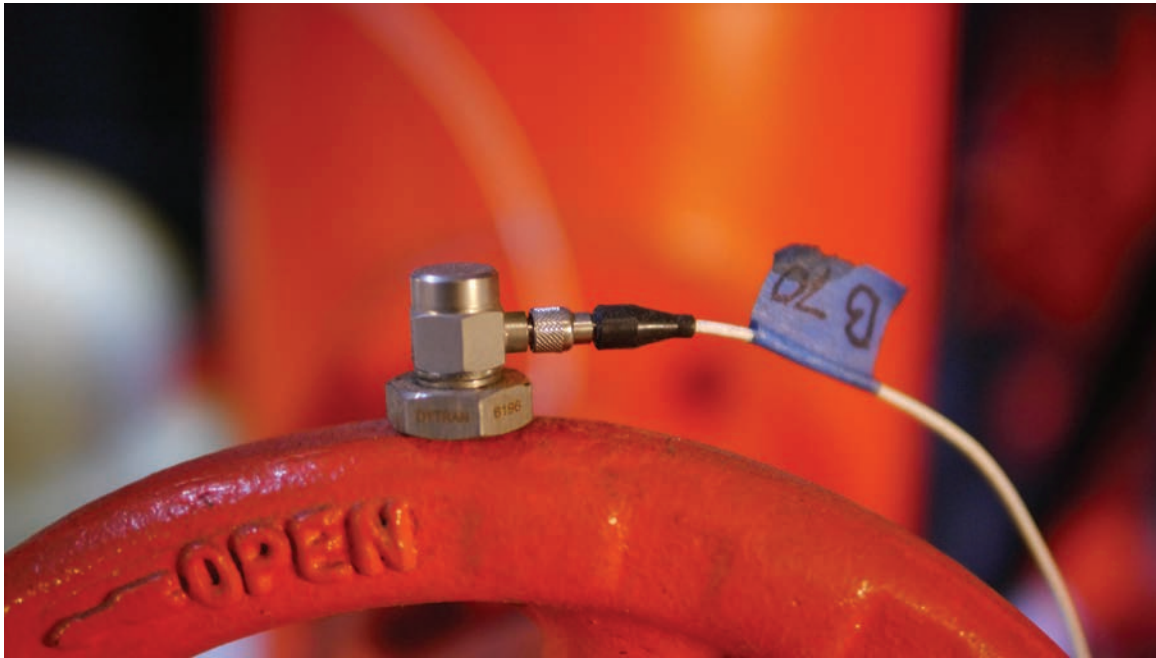
At the core of Fontana’s pioneering works, whether realized for museums, broadcast radio, or public, nonart sites, is the re-spatialization of architectural structures to create new sensorial environments. Bridges and passageways, structures that link people to place, are central to his “iconography,” as evinced by several works, among them *Harmonic Bridge*, Tate Modern, London (2006); *Sonic Shadows*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2010); and a recent project that commemorates the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge (2012). [The artist has also proposed a second sound piece for Chicago’s BP Pedestrian Bridge that connects Millennium Park with Grant Park to the east.] Fontana sees bridges as “living structures” with an inner life, a symphony of hidden sounds that the artist reveals and renders as a physical experience. Installing accelerometers or vibration sensors to the undersides of his iconic structures, Fontana records the tempos of foot and vehicular traffic, alongside the musical intonations of load and wind, which are then transmitted via a live feed to another site.

These sites include historical markers, subways and train stations, and often the façades of buildings, as in *Vertical Water* (1991), whereby the powerful waves of Niagara Falls sonically cascaded over the front of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In the earlier *Oscillating Steel Grids along the Brooklyn Bridge*, New York (1983), the seemingly dormant acoustics of the Brooklyn Bridge, one of the oldest suspension bridges in the United States, were projected onto the façade of the World Trade Center. At once a celebration of the technical feats of both architectural monuments, the work has become in its afterlife and in the aftermath of 9/11 a potent metaphor for loss and reclamation.

With these works, Fontana creates an acoustic architecture: the found sounds inhabit the new space and the body of the listener, which, in turn, embody the found sounds. Sound artist Camille Norment has written about the ghostly nature of ambient sound that assumes a corporeal existence through Fontana’s resoundings. “Like a ghost in the machine,” she states, “Fontana’s disembodied sounds take possession of the sites to which they are channeled, and in the most compelling of his projects, the sonic ghosts have something to say. . . . The immense force with which the sounds occupy the space causes them to take on a visceral, physical quality; the bodiless becomes body.”⁴

Fontana’s resoundings also function as memorials to the unheard, hidden histories or “acoustic memories” of a place, brought to life and given a new identity, much in the same way that artist Krzysztof Wodiczko’s public projections on the façades of urban architecture make visible the traumas of history and those forgotten in victory’s wake. In Fontana’s *Distant Trains* (1984), for example, the artist animated a neglected field, once the site of the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, Europe’s busiest train station before the Second World War. Here, he transmitted the cacophony of a modern train station rigged with microphones in Cologne through a network of loudspeakers buried in the open ground of the former station, collapsing the spatial coordinates of past and present.

According to Fontana, “sounds never stop,” an observation that shares affinities with Henry David Thoreau’s statement “Music is continuous, only listening is intermittent,” and with John Cage’s revelation of the impossibility of silence, as proved in his seminal composition *4’33”* (1952). The title refers to the duration of the piece (four minutes and thirty-three seconds), in which the performer sat still at a piano and never played the instrument, forcing the audience to listen to the sounds of the surrounding environment. Fontana notes the profound significance of Cage to his own work; the artist, trained as a composer, once studied under Cage. However, he rejects Cage’s belief in the role of chance. Instead, Fontana sees environments as systems of patterns that become coherent. “Structures, even where unexpected, can occur,” he observes. “Sound is a state of mind; listening is akin to meditation.”



ABOVE Fontana uses a device called an accelerometer to record the ambient sounds that are central to his sonic sculptures
Photo: Bill Fontana

Each urban environment, with its inherent patterns and systems of sounds, affords Fontana the opportunity to create spatial compositions that connect to the idiosyncrasies of place, while generating new panoramas for negotiating the matrix of the city. Fontana embraces architecture as experience, versus an edifice of mortar and brick, that engages the sonic life of its surroundings, yet contains its own aural infrastructure. However, unlike his previous sound sculptures that layer the ambient music of a site with sounds imported from another source, *Soaring Echoes* uses Pritzker Pavilion’s own multichannel sound system and unique design created specifically for the performing of music. The seven compositional pieces that comprise *Soaring Echoes* will play before and after performances during the outdoor concert season, either as a seven-and-a-half-minute sequence of short excerpts or as a two-hour loop that plays fifteen minutes from each movement. Each of the seven movements can also function as a stand-alone piece. Thus, *Soaring Echoes* creates a different set of expectations for the concert audience already attuned to the experience of listening, but like all of Fontana’s resoundings it instills “how listening becomes a part of making music.”



TOP Bill Fontana, *Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge* (2012)
Photo: Bill Fontana
BOTTOM Bill Fontana, *Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge* (2012)
Photo: Bill Fontana

Soaring Echoes belongs to the esteemed art collection of Millennium Park and the City of Chicago, which also includes public works by Anish Kapoor and Jaume Plensa. Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, a giant stainless-steel sculpture fondly nicknamed The Bean because of its beanlike form, serves as a gateway to the park. Its polished surface acts like a mirror and reflects the city's skyline, as well as visitors who pass under its twelve-foot high arch. Plensa's *Crown Fountain* invites viewers to wade in the cooling waters of its reflecting pool that unites two fifty-foot towers constructed of glass bricks. Equipped with LED screens, the towers project a video display of faces representing thousands of the city's citizens whose mouths spout streams of water at timed intervals.

In contrast to the bold physicality of *Crown Fountain* and *Cloud Gate*, *Soaring Echoes* appears transparent and immaterial, yet by broadening the definition of both music and sculpture, Fontana articulates the aural as a physical, hence, visual entity. *Soaring Echoes* also solicits a different kind of interactivity—what Fontana describes as “permanent listening.” “One of the most useful methods has been to create installations that connect two separate physical environments through the medium of permanent listening,” he writes. “As these acoustic overlays create the illusion of permanence, they start to interact with the temporal aspects of the visual space.”⁵

This illusion of permanence, alongside the collapsing of temporal and spatial dimensions, connects *Soaring Echoes* to other time-based media and to more environmental kinds of sculpture. In 1978 sculptor Robert Morris introduced the idea of “presentness” to describe sculptural practices that “open[ed] the expanded spatial field by employing distances rather than contained interiors.”⁶ “What I want to bring together for my model of ‘presentness,’” writes Morris, “is the intimate inseparability of the experience of physical space and that of an ongoing immediate present. Real space is not experienced except in real time.”⁷

One sees parallels between Morris's model of “presentness” and Fontana's notion of permanent listening. “I feel like I'm trying to create experiences that somehow cause somebody to disconnect,” says Fontana, “and rediscover being present and aware at a certain moment in time.”⁸ Such awareness takes the listener on a journey that traverses distances grand and small, a journey where the percussive call of a woodpecker and the toll of a unknown bell meet the rhythms of downtown Chicago, all on an open expanse of green lawn.



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ABOVE Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park at the time of installation for *Soaring Echoes*
Photo: Bill Fontana

BELOW Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park at the time of installation for *Soaring Echoes*
Photo: Bill Fontana





ABOVE Bill Fontana recording the resonant sounds of one of Edward Kemeys's Lions in front of the Art Institute of Chicago, October 2011
 Photo: Amy Honchell
 PREVIOUS PAGE Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park at the time of installation for *Soaring Echoes*
 Photo: Bill Fontana

Notes

Unless noted otherwise, all quotes from an interview by the author with Bill Fontana, May 11, 2012.

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- ¹ Joran Rudi, "Resounding Experience – an Interview with Bill Fontana," *Soundscape in the Arts* (Oslo, 2010), pp. 271 and 278.
- ² Bill Fontana, "The Relocation of Ambient Sound: Urban Sound Sculpture," see Essays and Ideas, from the artist's website resoundings.org.
- ³ Rudi, "Resounding Experience," *Soundscape in the Arts*, p. 276.
- ⁴ Camille Norment, "Resounding Relativity," *Soundscapes in the Arts* (Oslo, 2010).
- ⁵ Bill Fontana, "Resoundings," see Essays and Ideas, resoundings.org.
- ⁶ Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 197.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁸ Rudi, "Resounding Experience," *Soundscapes on the Arts*, p. 278.