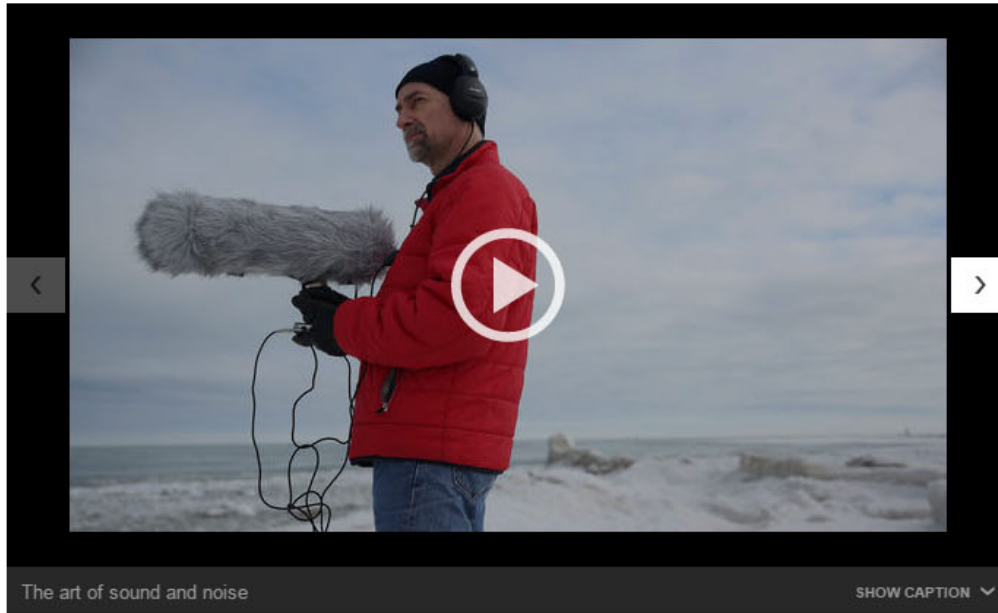


Sound experts make art of the noise all around us +



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By **Barbara Brotman** · Contact Reporter

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"This," said Eric Leonardson, "is a hailstorm."

Outside the window, the sun was shining.

But inside through the earbuds plugged into Leonardson's laptop, thunder cracked. Rain started drumming. The hail moved in, first sounding like a snare drum, then like popcorn popping and finally making a BANG-BANG-BANG worthy of the hailstorm that damaged the Garfield Park Conservatory in 2011.

In fact, this was that very storm.

Leonardson had recorded it. Now he was playing it for me, in a foretaste of the kinds of sounds you might hear Sunday, Jan. 25, at Brushwood Center in Ryerson Woods.

Brushwood will host a "soundwalk" through the woods and then a performance by Chicago Phonography, a loose collective of sound artists like Leonardson, who is executive director of the World Listening Project and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

They seek to make art with and draw attention to what they call the soundscape.

The soundscape is "the sounds of what we are in right now — the sounds that are coming and going all the time," Leonardson said.

Once he defined it, I found myself listening to it.

Inside the Rogers Park cafe where we were chatting, it was an eclectic mashup.

The hum of conversations. The periodic bell-peal of a woman's laughter. The scraping of fork against plate. Two women sitting next to us reading out loud from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. David Bowie on the sound system.

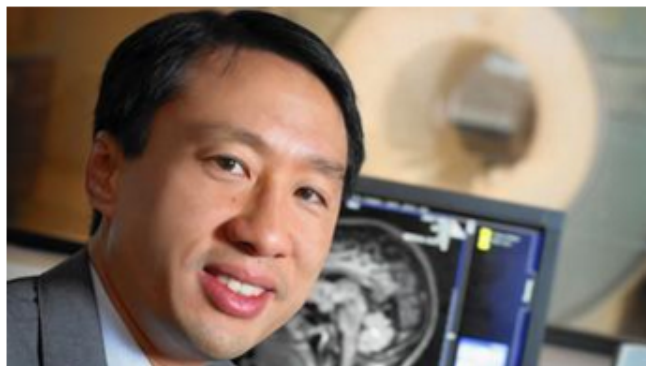
It was the sound of warmth and sociability. It made me feel comfortable and happy.

Which illustrated one of Leonardson's points about the power of sound.

Soundscape awareness, he said, draws attention to an ever-changing relationship between people, who make sound, listen to it and are affected by it; sounds themselves; and the environment.

"Sound plays an important role in providing a sense of place," he said. "It is essential to our well-being."

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auditory charm.

Leonardson hated hearing huge pile drivers pounding steel I-beams into the earth during the construction of a parking garage near his apartment in Rogers Park.

Leonardson is particularly intrigued by sounds that have aspects of music — rhythm, tone and pitch.

The radiator in his apartment puts on a regular performance. Leonardson described the composition:

"It gives a little tap at first. A second later there might be a bit of a hiss. Then a clanking. Then the hiss extends. Then there's a flurry of sound."

Even construction noise can have

But he recorded the sound from his window. And when he listened back to the recording, it changed how he felt about the noise.

"The steel had this bell-like timbre," he said. "It was like large bells ringing and reflecting back and forth."

With the additional sounds of traffic noise, waves on the beach and birdsong, he ended up with a mix of natural and man-made sound, with the pile drivers providing an insistent rhythm.

"It made for an interesting recording," he said.

On Sunday, Jan. 25, members of Chicago Phonography will perform a kind of sound improvisation concert, playing field recordings simultaneously in an unrehearsed and unpredictable collage.

"It can be really sublime; it can be absurd," Leonardson said.

Sitting in the cafe, I got a taste of the possible odd combinations. While I was listening through the ear buds to a recording Leonardson made of tree frogs in Blackwell Forest Preserve, I could also hear the music playing in the cafe.

The result was a charming combination of *Eh-eh-eh! Eh-eh-eh!* and *"It's my party and I'll cry if I want to ..."*

It takes dedication to record soundscapes. Leonardson once let himself be bitten by mosquitoes while recording cicadas in a forest preserve at sunset because he didn't want to mar the recording by slapping at them.

But you don't have to record soundscapes. You can just listen more closely to the sounds around you.

It's easy not to. We are a visual culture. We give short shrift to sound. We mask it with headphones; we dismiss it as background noise.

But if you listen to it differently, you hear it differently.

There is a symphony out there. Fires are crackling; traffic is humming; snow shovels are scraping; "L" cars are screeching; boots are crunching over snow.

There are woods you can amble through, listening to your breath, the wind, the silence on your own soundwalk.

It's all there, free for the listening. All you have to pay is attention.

The free soundwalk and Chicago Phonography performance, presented by the World Listening Project and the Midwest Society for Acoustic Ecology, will be held from 1 to 3 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 25, at the Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods. Information is at <http://www.brushwoodcenter.org>.

You can hear field recordings by members of Chicago Phonography at <https://soundcloud.com/chicagophonography>.

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