

## SONICBernheim – A Site-Specific Lecture and Performance Series for Everyone

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**ABSTRACT:** SONICBernheim is a lecture and performance series that explores relationships between sound, music, and nature. Since 2014, there have been six programs presented at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, a park located just outside the city of Louisville, Kentucky. Each program features a lecture by a guest scholar accompanied by site-specific performances from local and regional artists. Performers and lecturers are encouraged to expand their traditional techniques to address questions raised by the Bernheim landscape and soundscape.

As attendees focus their attention on the soundscape, an opportunity arises to consider the implications of noise pollution, the aesthetic qualities of all forms of sound, and the place of sound in the arts.

In this paper, co-curators Aaron Rosenblum and Sara Callaway reflect on and address the challenges and successes of bringing adventurous sound art programming to an audience far removed from the larger cities commonly associated with experimental art programming.

**KEYWORDS:** Sound art in nature, Public lecture, Urban/rural borders, Site-specific performance, Curation.

## 1. Introduction

The first SONICBernheim event took place on November 6th, 2014. Despite intermittent rain and temperatures that hovered around 40 F / 4 C an intrepid audience converged at the edge of a small lake. Experimental musicians and fans of adventurous art mingled with more traditional patrons of Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. The latter group was largely composed of families and individuals interested in the outdoors, usually at Bernheim to hike or learn about nature. A short workshop, seven performances, a sound installation, and one light sculpture challenged and entertained the audience.

Since that first evening, SONICBernheim has evolved into a lecture and performance series exploring the relationships between sound, music, and nature. We have presented six programs, all but the first featuring a lecture by a national/international guest scholar accompanied by two to three site-specific performances. The performers are selected from local and regional experimental, jazz, electronic, and contemporary classical communities. In consultation with the curators, each performer chooses a distinct location in which to work. Performers and lecturers are encouraged to expand their traditional techniques and address questions raised by the Bernheim landscape and soundscape.

As the events help attendees focus their attention on the soundscape, an opportunity arises to consider the implications of noise pollution, the aesthetic qualities of all forms of sound, and the place of sound in the arts. As we enter our fourth year curating the series, we are taking the time to consider our process, the impact of the series, and our approach to future programming.

## 2. Place

### 2.1. Urban and Rural Kentucky

SONICBernheim is hardly the first series of outdoor sound art performances in the United States, or elsewhere. However, for a small US city, far from the coasts and from cities like New York and Los Angeles that are more associated with progressive arts programming, the series is unique. The greater Louisville metropolitan area is home to 1.5 million people. Of these, 760,000 live inside the merged city-county of Louisville and Jefferson County. Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest is located 25 miles from downtown Louisville in neighboring Bullitt County, which is home to only 79,000 people. While Bullitt County's residents are counted in the total metropolitan population, they represent the steep dropoff from the urban density of Louisville to the rural nature of the surrounding areas (US Census Bureau 2017).

Bernheim is privately owned by the I.W. Bernheim Foundation, but open to members and the general public. It sits on 14,000 acres (5650 hectares) of land and is considered an

ecological gem in the greater Louisville area, full of wildlife and beautiful vistas. It is home to a significant collection of outdoor sculpture and visual art situated among the arboretum's collections of plant and tree specimens. Trails, wildlife, and programming draw a large, diverse audience to the forest, including the 6,000 individuals and families who hold Bernheim memberships. Bernheim has also been a pioneer of environmental stewardship in the area, building the first LEED Platinum-certified structure in Kentucky.

Bringing public art to this rural setting has been part of the Bernheim mission since its founding in 1929. Since 1980, Bernheim has hosted artists-in-residence each year, primarily in the visual arts (Bernheim 2017). However, while live musical performances are part of many outdoor family events at Bernheim, music that reacts more directly to the soundscape and environment has not been a primary focus.



Figure 1. The Big Prairie at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. (Photo courtesy of Bernheim)

## 2.2. *LISTEN!* and SONICBernheim

SONICBernheim was the result of an outdoor installation project halted by inclement weather. In the summer of 2014 we composed *LISTEN!*, a deck of poster-sized cards bearing listening prompts, for CONNECT at Bernheim, an annual outdoor music and art event. The event was just getting underway, with many attendees already on-site, when an unusual weather pattern put a series of severe thunderstorms on course for Bernheim. For the safety of artists and attendees, the event was cancelled. On our way out, we ran into the organizer of the event, Claude Stephens, Bernheim's Facilitator of Outreach and Regenerative Design. He was busy dealing with the sudden cancellation of one of his largest events of the year, but he took a moment to speak with us. He said, seemingly off-hand, "why don't you all do your own sonic evening here?"



Figure 2. *Listen!* card installed at the CONNECT at Bernheim event.

That “sonic evening” became SONICBernheim. We have worked closely with Claude Stephens since 2014 to develop the series. Our goal from the start was to go beyond simply having an outdoor concert or bringing Louisville’s experimental musicians to Bernheim to do what they already did indoors and in town. *LISTEN!* had been our response to CONNECT’s already sonically-crowded environment – we wanted to encourage listening rather than creating sounds of our own. SONICBernheim was our opportunity to invite contemplation not only through observation but also through the creation of works made with the explicit purpose of dialogue with the soundscape and landscape of Bernheim.



Figure 3. Matt Weir’s *Earth Measure* being used as a sounding board for flute and voice as Chamber Cartel performs Salvatore Sciarrino’s *La Perfezione di Uno Spirito Sotile* at SONICBernheim, June 20, 2016. (Photo by Michael Broyles)

In order to provide access to restrooms, water, and handicapped-accessible venues SONICBernheim events are limited to the 600 acre (245 hectare) arboretum area. We are



further limited by the available sources of power, since many of our musicians and lecturers require amplification. The arboretum, though home to a beautiful and extremely varied horticultural landscape, is located in close proximity to a busy state road, an interstate highway, a large bourbon distillery, and other sources of anthropogenic sound. We can not provide an environment free of human sound, nor do we wish to. Instead, we encourage inquiry about both the natural and man-made sonic environment: how complete is the respite from urban life if the noises of transportation and industry follow us to the sites of our recreation? Are those man-made sounds necessarily interruptions? How complete is the consideration of art in nature if the sonic arts are not included?



Figure 4. The 600 acre (245 hectare) arboretum portion of Bernheim's 14,000 acre (5,650 hectare) grounds. (Map courtesy of Bernheim)

### 2.3. Working Artists in Kentucky

We do not wish to present a stereotypical image of Kentucky as a rural cultural backwater. There is a thriving arts community in Louisville, with a major art fair, a prominent orchestra, mainstream theater, and arts-focused public education at the primary through post-secondary levels. There are also underground and experimental music, art, and literary scenes. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the city and region lack the kind of rich sonic and experimental arts cultures that exist in larger US and European cities. A small portion of the population may have experienced a sound art installation or have a passing knowledge of John Cage. Meanwhile, a great majority may have never considered the possibilities of sonic art nor been given the opportunity to encounter sound art, sonic sculpture, experimental music, or contemporary classical pieces focused on the soundscape.

Partially as a result of prevailing economic and social forces, there are relatively few professional artists working full-time in the Louisville region, especially in audiovisual and multimedia art. This is true of us, as well. We curate SONICBernheim and create our own music and sound works outside of our primary full-time employment. The lack of support for working artists in the region results in a challenge in creating the time and opportunities that our series performers need to design and plan their works for SONICBernheim.

### 3. Curation

#### 3.1. Performer Selection

Until 2016, all artists performing at SONICBernheim came from within the Louisville metropolitan area, and were invited by the co-curators. In 2016, we implemented two changes to the selection process: the addition of one regionally-based performer or ensemble to each event, and an application process in which interested artists submit short proposals. Along with proposing a piece for performance or installation, applicants were asked to describe the role of natural sound and the environment in their practice (if any). With little promotion of the application process, we received 17 well thought out proposals for a total of 6 performance spots. It is our opinion that performers became more engaged through the application process and were considering the landscape and soundscape from the early development of their pieces. Expecting responses primarily from Louisville, we were surprised to see applications from the nearby city of Lexington, Kentucky, as well as an application from a pair of artists in the United Kingdom.

The performers at SONICBernheim work in many genres: jazz, contemporary classical, post-rock, experimental pop, sound art, free improvisation, butoh, and more. Though the performers come from different genres, many have collaborated with each other in the past. A unique and positive result of Louisville's active music culture is cross-pollination between genres and music scenes. In our experience, larger cities have enough people working in any one genre to form a community around it, while in Louisville the numbers are small enough that if the fans and musicians of free jazz did not also support the fans and musicians of experimental rock, there would be too few people for either to collaborate with. As such, many collaborations grow up across genres that are better defined in other locales. This phenomenon partially explains our collaboration with each other as curators.

#### 3.2. Lectures Amongst Performances

As SONICBernheim moved from its first unofficial event into an ongoing series promoted by Bernheim we were asked to meet a new requirement. A funding source existed to support lectures on environment and sustainability, and we could access those funds if a lecture was a part of each event. This challenge gave birth to the performance-and-lecture

format that has remained steady through five SONICBernheim events in 2015 and 2016, and will continue in 2017.

Adding a lecture drastically changed our series, the first iteration of which in 2014 consisted of many short sound works spread around the landscape. However, as soon as the requirement was assigned it seemed clear that it would push the series in a direction we both wished to take it. Since much of the audience we hoped to reach may not have previously considered the connections between sound, music, and nature the lectures gave us a way to not only present art but also to share knowledge. Lectures add context and give the attendees a basic framework for understanding the events unfolding around them. For repeat attendees the lectures not only expand understanding of the soundscape but also the variety of perspectives available for the consideration of the subject.

Our lecturers are from a variety of disciplines, offering views on sound, music, and nature from areas as varied as acoustic ecology and classical composition. Unlike performers, lecturers are chosen directly by us rather than through a proposal system and we try to curate a balance of fields and topics. We each have our own criteria for who might make an ideal lecturer, based on our overlapping but distinct interests. Eventually, we come to a mutually agreed upon list of invitees for the year. Of course, the targets of our invitations are not always interested or available. Luckily, there are always more lecturers we would like to invite than there are events in the series.

Though we expected positive outcomes from including lectures, we didn't consider the impact the events would have on the lecturers themselves. After our first few invitations and logistical discussions we realized that many of the lecturers, while excited about speaking, were also feeling a little out of their comfort zones. A few told us they had never spoken outside – not just outdoors but outside of academia. Placing the lecturer outdoors situates the researcher within the subject of their research. Bringing them outside of academia allows both audience and lecturer to approach their research in new ways.

We believe SONICBernheim helps break down barriers between the audience and the lecturer, offering an instant illustration of the themes being discussed. For example a lecture on the forest resources used to build classical instruments given while surrounded by trees (Aaron Allen at SONICBernheim in 2015) or a lecture on field-recording-based and nature-activated sound art installations accompanied by an insect chorus and interrupted by the discharge of a hunting rifle (Stephen Vitiello at SONICBernheim in 2016).

And, it wasn't just an art or music crowd, but also families and individuals who may otherwise never experience anything like what you are sharing.  
(Vitiello 2016)

## 4. Performances/Lectures

### 4.1. Selected Performances

Performers at SONICBernheim have made use of the soundscape and landscape in a number of ways. We are familiar with their music as it is played in traditional venues, but their performances at SONICBernheim are made whole by the place in which they are performed. They are unique to that evening and moment in time. While we work with each performer to select their performance area and work out logistics, we give them the freedom to create within their space. Their performance at the event is also the first time we see and hear the performance in its entirety. Here we describe the strategies of three performers to highlight the different approaches used throughout the series.

Artist and musician Jim Marlowe's "Barbara Hershey" performed at SONICBernheim in November of 2015 used distance, landforms, and architecture to explore the propagation of sound. Marlowe was set up inside of an old, disused grain silo at a distance of several hundred meters from the intended audience listening area. He used an electric guitar, sampling pedal, and large amplifier. The land between Marlowe and the listening area obscured the silo from vision, with a high slope, two ponds, several stands of trees, and an open prairie all intersecting between performer and audience. The performance consisted of a short, sharp tone captured on the sampling pedal, repeated over and over again, broadcast at high volume. The sample, repeated, became percussive and driving.

During the performance, Marlowe altered the position of the amplifier within the silo, thus altering the timbre of the sound as it travelled across the landscape. Listeners, in turn, explored the moonlit landscape in order to hear how the intense, frequency-limited sound was altered by changes in elevation, changes in location relative to the flora and open water, and in relation to existing structures. One brave child followed the sound all the way to its source and occupied the doorway of the silo, observing Marlowe's manipulations of the amplifier.



Figure 5. A listener, age 8, observing Jim Marlowe performing "Barbara Hershey" at SONICBernheim, November 25, 2015. (Photo by John Nation)



McKinley Moore, a native of rural Eastern Kentucky, who now lives in Louisville, made prominent use of the existing soundscape in his performance at SONICBernheim in October, 2016. A week before the performance, Moore travelled to Bernheim with us and an additional recordist, Shutaro Noguchi, to record at and around the selected site of his performance on the shore of Lake Nevin. The recordings, made in late September near and after dusk, featured insect activity, songbirds, and Canada geese arriving on the lake to spend the evening. For his performance, these recordings were manipulated live and combined with synthesizers and other sound sources.

The soundscape on the shore of Lake Nevin at the time of the performance was nearly identical to the soundscape during the recordings – geese were once again arriving, birds singing, and insects buzzing. At first listen, Moore’s recordings were sometimes indistinguishable from the surrounding soundscape, especially as his performance took place after dark, further obscuring sound sources natural and man-made.

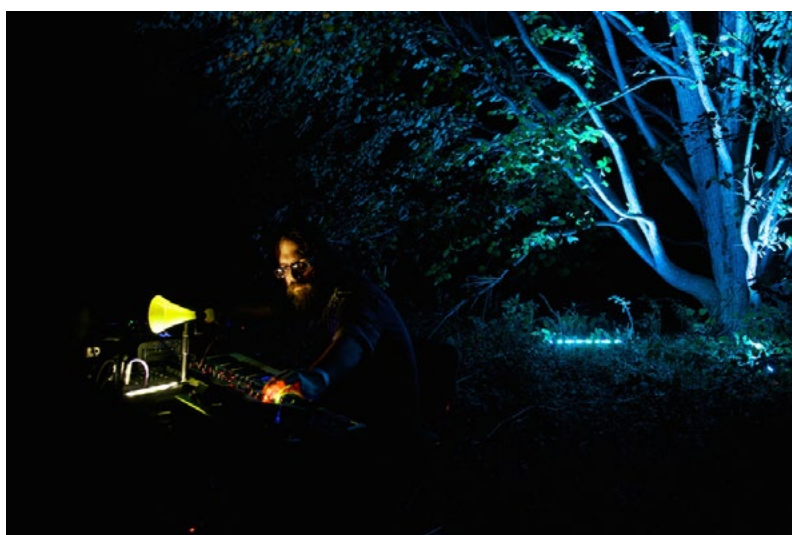


Figure 6. McKinley Moore performs at SONICBernheim, October 16, 2016 (Photo by John Nation)

Dane Waters, a musician and composer working in genres ranging from free-form improvisation to opera, performed a set of songs at the edge of a small pond at SONICBernheim in July, 2015. She performed on keyboard and vocals, both signals travelling through a series of effects processors and then through a single amplifier. Waters and her amplifier were sited on a small wooden platform built over one end of the pond. Her performance began just after dusk, and the pond, filled with reeds and other pond flora, came alive during her performance with the sounds of bullfrogs and insects. The woods surrounding the pond, too, were alive with the sounds of insects, birds, and amphibians. Waters performed at a volume that allowed the natural sounds to be an aleatoric element of the music. The bullfrogs, in particular, seemed to react to the performance. At the end of each song in the set, as soon as Waters’s amplifier was silent, a single, loud croak would emerge from the pond.



Figure 7. Dane Waters performing at SONICBernheim, July 31, 2015 (Photo by John Nation)

... so the pond was the heart of the piece. The frogs croaked and dove intermittently during the set, and I think the water reflected the sound while the thick grouping of trees surrounding, absorbed it, especially when the wind would pick up... I was able to see a bit of the pond, but I couldn't see a single soul. It was as if I was playing to the forest...And the fact that I really couldn't see only heightened my listening. (Waters 2016)

## 4.2. Selected Lectures

While varying in their fields of study, all of our visiting lecturers have been affiliated with universities. By offering both professors and the public the opportunity to speak and learn outside of a classroom, we hope that both sides can think differently about the role of academics in music, art, and everyday life.

Since 2015 SONICBernheim has hosted the following lectures:

- “A Forest of Violins: Stradivari, Music, & Sustainability” Aaron Allen, Director of the Environmental & Sustainability Studies Program and Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- “Edge of the Stage, Edge of the Wild” Allen Anderson, Composer and Professor of Composition and Music Theory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- “The Singing Soundscape” Kathy Kennedy, Sound Artist and Faculty Member at Concordia University, Montréal, Canada
- “Sound Works and Installation” Stephen Vitiello, Electronic Musician, Sound Artist and Professor of Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University
- “Listening Beyond the Acoustic Horizon” Denise Von Glahn, Curtis Mayes Orpheus Professor of Musicology, Florida State University

Each lecturer has shaped the event at which they spoke. Sharing their research and introducing new ideas to the audience encouraged people to think about place and sound differently but also created a deeper connection to the performances. It has, however, been difficult to know how to schedule the talk among the performances. Do we keep the talk at the beginning or is it better to have it as a mid-point? Should the lecture create context for the following performances or should it stand on its own? Would a lecture break the magic of the performances if it was placed mid-event? The following are two examples of the integration of lectures into our programming.

Our timeline often revolves around the sunset. We prefer to schedule the lecture while it is still light out so the speaker and audience are easily visible, and recommend against the use of video projection as a visual aid. However, since 2015, three speakers have required video projectors, and therefore needed to speak after dark. The first time video was used we observed mixed results on the pacing of the evening.

On a mild September evening in 2015, with a lunar eclipse on its way, Aaron Allen, professor of ecomusicology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, spoke after two performances, and before the concluding performance of the evening's program. The audience – the largest we had had – spread out on picnic blankets on the grass in the approaching darkness, listening to a lecturer who was soon to be invisible as he described his bright PowerPoint presentation. At that point in the evening, some people weren't ready to engage with an academic talk about sustainability practices and the materials used to make violins. However, even though the timing of his talk wasn't ideal many attendees followed up with us on how much they enjoyed the lecture, and Allen reported positive and engaged responses:

I was amazed by the questions and comments I received from children and retirees, professional musicians and amateur music lovers, and scientists and artists. I can't pretend that they were all there to engage with me; but it's precisely that fact – that there is a strong, interested, and diverse community for SONICBernheim – that makes it such a powerful program and experience for all. (Allen 2016)



Figure 8. Aaron Allen gets ready to speak at SONICBernheim, September 27, 2015 (Photo by John Nation)

Perhaps one of our most successful lecturers in breaking out of normal academic routine and adapting to the SONICBernheim environment was Denise Von Glahn, professor of musicology at Florida State University. Von Glahn spoke in daylight, directly after the first performance of the evening, on a warm, bright June evening. She has been our only lecturer not to use any recorded media in her presentation. Instead, she immediately made the soundscape her accompaniment, opening her talk with:

Three questions, 30 seconds, and a story. What do you hear? What does what you hear tell you about where you are? What about what you hear might you want to preserve? 30 seconds... (Von Glahn 2016)

The audience was left with the busy sounds of a warm Kentucky evening.

Von Glahn not only engaged the audience with thoughtful listening prompts, but also tied in her own personal story, reminiscing on her childhood and her connection to sounds at an early age. She described her research, bringing up a composer featured in her book, *Music and The Skillful Listener: American Women Compose the Natural World*. She spoke about composer Libby Larsen's piece, *Up Where the Air Gets Thin* for cello and double bass – not only how the piece was inspired by Mount Everest and how sound travels at high altitude, but also how the effects of climate change affect such places, the soundscape, and communication. At the end of her lecture two local musicians performed *Up Where the Air Gets Thin* after working with Von Glahn earlier that afternoon under the shade of a nearby stand of trees. This concluded her talk with an example of harmony between art and theory, local and national, and audience and place.





Figure 9. Denise Von Glahn (far right) working with local musicians Jon Silpayamanant, cello and Angela Thomas, double bass on Libby Larsen's *Up Where the Air Gets Thin*, June 20, 2016 (Photo by Michael Broyles)

Inside the woods, hiking on the trails, traversing the prairies, circumnavigating the lake, listening to the sounds of the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest as they mixed with the distant hum of the highway and the musics of instrumentalists and wildlife is an experience permanently etched in my memory. I conjure the sounds and smells of this woodland sanctuary and am reminded of my personal responsibility to our larger, shared ecological enterprise. (Von Glahn 2016)

## 5. Audience Response

The event brought together a unique community of experimental music listeners, art-night frequenters, small children, and picnickers, sharing an experience in a rare environment where all might meet and watch and listen and talk. This seems strikingly valuable, especially as fall 2016 receded into new realities of winter 2017. (Feeney 2017)<sup>1</sup>

Since the first event in 2014, we have learned along with our audience that, first and foremost, our series is not for everyone. Three years later we still have attendees who take the series to be outdoor concerts of a less adventurous nature. Nonetheless, at each three-hour event the majority of attendees stay for all of the performances, and the audience appears to be comprised people of many backgrounds. We are often surprised that the people who stumble upon the event by accident are sometimes the ones who stay the longest and

1. Percussionist Tim Feeney performed at SONICBernheim in October of 2016.



are the most engaged listeners. We take great pride in bringing the music, art, and ideas sometimes reserved for an audience of fellow-thinking arts consumers in the city to a more diverse audience.

It was truly a magical night as we had no idea what we were about to see, hear, and feel. After a lovely day of hiking we were watching the sun set when we noticed a group gathering by the lake. Mysterious tickets in hand we followed along blindly from show to show. Hours later on our drive home my [11 year old daughter] said, “I feel wonderful, can we go back to the forest right now?” (Moslemi 2016)

Of course, not all of the responses to the series have been positive. There is a silent response that is hard to qualify – leaving the event before it is over. Some who leave may simply not be able to attend for the entire time. Others have seemed disappointed or uninterested in the types of performances and lectures we have presented, but we have little concrete data from those who come to the events and choose to leave early.

We have had at least one communication from an attendee with specific complaints. The complaints did not concern the content of the performances, but instead the environment – often dark, with travel by foot or wheelchair between performance sites. As with other aspects of the series, we try to balance context and comfort with adventure and exploration. Needless to say, we are dedicated to the safety of our attendees, and will always take their feedback into consideration as we plan future events, balancing safety and adventure without giving up the uniqueness of the program.

## 6. Conclusion

[The events] make the case for sonic awareness and appreciation as indivisible from social and environmental responsibility. (Anderson 2016)

As curators, we continue to explore how music and sound change the way we hear and perceive our environment. We will continue to push our audience to open their ears and listen more thoughtfully. Our goal is not necessarily to have our audience grow in size, but rather for the attendees to grow as listeners, listeners that hold a deeper understanding of our shared responsibility to the world around us.

By mixing local musicians with national and international performers and speakers, we encourage a cross-pollination to positively affect our local music scene. SONICBernheim urges musicians and sound artists to consider place and environment in their work, and we hope over time this also becomes an integral part of the cultural fabric of our community.

Listening is a practice of critical importance to our artistic community and to our society at large. It connects us to our surroundings and engages us in the here and now. If we can learn to listen we can become more empathetic towards our environment, its inhabitants, and each other.

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