The Classical Musical Educational Project of *Sesame Street*

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Introduction: In *media* res

On a summer evening in Saint Louis I was listening to the radio in the kitchen. In the research for this paper, which had grown from a character study on Yo-Yo Ma to encompass the themes of eduction and public broadcasting, I had decided that I should actually own some kind of broadcast receiver. After looking into mini televisions, I settled on the conservative option of a radio. As I chopped onions, my local NPR station's weekend programming buzzed in the background.

A program on the recent events in Afghanistan had ended and the PSA space, where a commercial station would have run adds, began. I heard a woman's voice say "This is Saint Louis Public Radio. Understanding Starts Here."

My ears perked up. What an intriguing declaration. It is not "This is Saint Louis Public Radio, your source of news," or "This is Saint Louis Public Radio: hear the nation." Instead, the slogan is a promise to increase your *understanding.* NPR is offering not just to inform you, but moreover to provide some kind of ethical education, presumably into cultural-socio-political events such that one comes away *understanding.*

A strange word, "understanding." In the context of the socio-political, cultural

and economic topics under the purview of national public radio, something seems very kind about the word. It feels emotionally laden and steeped in empathy.

Its usage does not imply factual understanding, something like "Let us factually explain what's going on in Afghanistan," but rather, "cultivate an understanding of the human experiences of Afghanistan along with us."

Etymologically, the "under" in the first half of the word "understand" does not denote the more modern "below," but rather among or in-between.[1] To understand is to stand among. What *NPR* is offering, then, is empathy in a broadcast.

This is continuous with the founding rhetoric of *NPR* and its focus on hearing common people speak. *All Things Considered*, now one of the most listened-to programs on American radio, debuted with the chaotic coverage of what at the time was the biggest anti-Vietnam war protest to date. It consisted of tape gathered by multiple reporters at the event with no overarching narrative. It was unlike anything on the radio at the time. Its chaos was intended to capture the chaos of the moment, but was also part of a larger aesthetic and political trend on the program to hear the voices of normal Americans. Something now known as the "public radio sound."

The sound is recognizable to this day by its lack of a narrator and the featuring of the voices of common people. It was pioneered by the "founding mother" of *NPR*, radio journalist Susan Stamberg. She was inspired by the cinema verité of the time, saying that the idea "was to tell a story without telling it— just sound through chunks." This meant no authoritative radio voice, but instead just giving everyday Americans time to talk before moving along to another speaker. The work of narrative interpretation is left to the listener, who is given a more rhizomatic view of the events— a radical new direction in radio journalism and broadcast culture

1. "understand (v.)," accessed October 31, 2021, `https://www.etymonline.com/word/understand`.

more generally.

One particular aspect of the public radio sound was the use of "cross talk," a technique in which two voices are layered onto one another in polyphony, which was inspired by Glenn Gould's "contrapuntal storytelling" in *The Solitude Trilogy*.[2] Stamberg retrospectively described the debut as having "no interfering narrator."[3]

The showcasing of alternative voices was so central to the ethos of the young network that *NPR* turned down a $300,000 donation from the Ford Foundation contingent on the network hiring well-known broadcast journalist Edward P. Morgan as host of *All Things Considered*. Morgan, recipient of a Peabody Award, would have certainly brought the new network credibility, but *NPR* feared that the authoritative voice would get in the way of the alternative voices that they wanted to showcase. The ethos of "standing among" seems to be baked in to the entire project of public radio.

This ethos is visible in public television as well. In the mid-1960s Ralph Lowell, Board Chairman of the Boston Educational Television station proposed that the Oval Office put together a commission on educational television. President Johnson, believing that this was a job for the private sector, turned to the Carnegie Corporation. What was formed was a diverse team known as the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. Among others, this team included writer Ralph Ellison, concert pianist Rudolph Serkin, and labor leader Leonard Woodcock.[4]

The commission put together a report titled *Public Television, A Program for Action* which stressed the artistic and transformative value of the medium and the importance of using it to resist the pressure toward uniformity found in commercial

2. Jeff Porter, *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 197.

3. Ibid., 185.

4. John Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," *The Review of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968): 409.

television but instead seek out and satisfy the needs of the nation's diversity.[5]

The need for this shift in broadcasting came about because the United States Government had granted access to the airwaves to commercial stations first, only adding public stations to the media landscape as part of Great Society era reformations. Canada and England, on the other hand, created public broadcasting first and only later opened the airwaves to commercial stations.[6]

It was this same era of reform that lead the Carnegie Corporation in search of a way to increase the reach of their humanitarian educational programs for inner-city preschoolers.[7] Lloyd Morrisett, the vice president of programs at the Carnegie Corporation[8] and a psychologist[9] had noticed his own daughter's fascination with the television medium when his three-year old got up early in the morning to watch the pre-broadcast RCA test patterns.[10]

Morrisett then tasked Joan Cooney, a publicity specialist for the *United States Steel Hour*, a twice-monthly series on CBS,[11] with the project of producing a study on the educational possibilities of children's television, backed by a $15,000 grant. The resulting report, *The Potential Uses of Television in Children's Education* analyzed the ways that the relatively new technology of television could be used as an educational supplement for preschoolers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It was this report which lead to the creation of the program at hand, *Sesame Street.*

5. Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," 410.
6. Ibid., 412.
7. Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Viking, 2008), 15.
8. Jans Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 1966, 7.
9. Davis, *Street Gang*, 15.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 27.

Part I

Listening with the Street:
Attention, Education, and Entertainment

Entertainment: Welcome to *Sesame Street*

Sesame Street needs little introduction. One of the longest running shows in the history of television,[12] it has been a cultural staple of generations of children—and their parents—in the United States and worldwide.

While *Sesame Street* is an educational program, it is notable for its entertainment value. This stems from the realization by the original producers of the program that in order to compete with the non-educational television competition only a turn of the dial away, televised preschool education would have to be just as entertaining.[13] This is especially true given that at the program's premiere in 1969, there was nothing like it in the children's media landscape.[14] This means that there were no models for the production of the program, nor for its reception—they could not trust that children knew how to watch educational programs.

This realization lead to a fundamental characteristic of the production structure of the program: rather than hire child development and education specialists to produce the show, they used education research to inform decisions made by seasoned TV, radio, and Broadway producers, writers, composers, and actors. This decision was informed by the observation that children respond well to adult television and were known to recite adds for beer and cigarettes, as well as having their attention held by adult variety shows such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In.*[15]

But *Sesame Street* is not just entertaining for children. In order to encourage parents to watch the show along with their children, a move which would also help keep preschoolers focused, the producers aimed to make the show entertaining

12. "Sesame Street," *Britannica Academic*.
13. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 38.
14. Davis, *Street Gang*, See chapter 3 for a survey of the contemporary children's television landscape.
15. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," *Jounral of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 16.

enough for parents to want to watch it along with their children.[16] [17] To this effect you see... and the featuring of musical performers that parents would know.

Entertainment, the producers understood, is a tool for cultivating attention.

Attention

16. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "*Sesame Street* as a Musical Comedy-Variety Show," in *Music in Comedy Television: Notes on Laughs*, ed. Liz Giuffre and Philip Hayward (Milton Park, UK: Routeledge, 2017), 294.

17. Mixed-age television targeting likely began on the television program *Captain Kangaroo*. Davis, *Street Gang*, 46

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