Playing *with* the Music: Ecologies of Attention and Understating in the Classical Music Education Project of *Sesame Street*

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Introduction

If I have done anything right this paper should be easy to read. I think that is the kindest thing a writer can do. If I have done anything right this paper should also not be quite like anything you have seen before. I might say that is the second kindest thing a writer can do.

In the spirit of easy reading, here's a summary of what lies ahead:

This is a paper about the ecologies of attention and understanding evident in and emergent from the presentation of classical music on the classic children's television program *Sesame Street.*

The paper takes three parts. The first part is an analysis of context, attention, and education on the program, framed through the analogy of bird-watching. I argue that the classical music education which is presented on the program deviates from the humanitarian norm of "uplift" and absolute aesthetics—the bird's-eye view—and instead presents an understanding of music which resonates with ideas of "listening with"—the view of the bird watcher, or in the words of Jenny Odell, the bird *listener* who observes and is observed; who through acts of attention learns to perceive the world around them pluralisticly. In this section I argue that while *Sesame Street* engages with aspects of critical pedagogy, it is ultimately resistant to educational classifications. The program is itself *ecological*, composed of many interacting and competing parts which create a program whose character is emergent and consistent, but not unified.

Part two is an analysis of classical music performance on the program, framed through the analogy of the worm-listener—they who listen as outsiders to the arcane sound of the world beneath our feet. This section deals with questions of parody, virtuosity, and childhood. It contains three character studies of classical

musicians who made appearances on the program: Yo-Yo Ma, Evelyn Glennie, and Lang Lang.

In this section I argue that *Sesame Street* takes part in a long tradition of classical music parody which welcomes the outsider while at the same time engages the classical music native and initiate —that is, the worm, who has spent its life embedded in the classical strata. *Sesame Street* neither challenges nor exalts the classical music canon, but rather serves as an enabling technology, a *geophone*, which allows for the areal listener to perceive and engage with the arcane sounds of underworld.

This project takes shape in two media: one is what you are reading right now, the "white paper" presentation of the research. The other is a non-striated recreation of the field in the form of a Multi User Domain, or MUD. The third section of this paper deals with the themes of diversity, equity, and liberation which inform the project.

Each part begins with a prologue—or dare I say, a dramatic monologue —written in first-person perspective which grounds the following discussion. If the chapters look at musical and educational ecologies, the prologues give lived context for the geological bedrock on which these ecologies are based.

I'll count myself off: LIGHTS. CAMERA. ACTION!

Prologue: 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

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

2. Jeff Porter, *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 197.
3. Ibid., 185.

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 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

4. John Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," *The Review of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968): 409.
5. Ibid., 410.
6. Ibid., 412.

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.*

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

The Bird-Watcher: 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]

In terms of music, you see to this effect the featuring of musical performers that parents would know, often playing educational parodies of their own work. For example, Norah Jones...

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

Listening with: Attention as Grounds for Ethics

The philosophy of music on *Sesame Street* was perhaps best summarized by Joe Rapso, the first music director of the program, in a 1971 press release. The program's diverse music, he said, would help bridge cultural divides when the kids were grown up and "bring all kids together, whether they live in Grosse Point or on 148th Street in the Bronx... And the beauty of our music is maybe that the child in the Grosse Pointe home is hearing gospel and blues for the first time and the black child in the urban ghetto is hearing a harpsichord and flute for the first time. Someday, when they grow up, they'll have one more thing in common."[18]

By using entertainment to focus attention and expose children to music from other social and economic contexts, Rapso is promising not only a musical education, but also an ethical one. Having "one more thing in common" is perhaps here grounds for the social understanding which is historically valued by public media.

This understanding through sonic exposure resonates with the theories of media developed by Jenny Odell in *How To Do Nothing*, a book at the intersection of media

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

18. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," 297.

theory and ecology. Odell places attention as the center of ethics. We decide who is seen, who is heard, and who has agency, through acts of attention.[19]

Echoing Pauline Oliveros, Odell describes a way of engaging with the world similar to that of bird watching, which she says is better described as bird *listening*. The listener learns to differentiate and identify the sounds of the different birds in an environment, and thereby becomes aware of the ecology around them and their place within it.[20]

This ecological, attention-based understanding of the world requires that one gives up the idea of discrete entities, simple origin stories, and simple one-to-one causalities, and above all, requires time. The direct product of this attention, Odell says, is context. That is, paying close attention can help us better understand the nuanced ecologies of being and identities that make up the ecological relationships of an environment. The longer that the attention is held, the more context appears.[21]

This is musically apparent in the skits of Muppet Simon Soundman. In one skit, Simon visits a music store, where he tell the shopkeeper that he is in the market for a "nice, shiny—" and then we hear a long trumpet lick as his mouth moves in time.

"Uhh... Ohh... Would you mind repeating that, sir?"

"No, indeed. What I said was I'd like to buy a nice, shiny—" and then the trumpet sounds again.

The shopkeeper goes off-screen and returns with an instrument.

"Here you are, sir. A beautiful new violin."

"No, no, no... I don't want a—" this time he makes violin sounds. "You see, because what I asked for was a nice, shiny—"

And the skit goes on like this with for a number of minutes with the shopkeeper

19. Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2019), 154.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 155.

bringing back the wrong instruments and Simon Soundman referring to them only through impeccable renditions of their sound.

This skit uses a simple and entertaining gag to expose children to the sounds, names, and appearances of several common instruments. Like Odell discusses leaning to identify birds by their sounds, children are taught here to learn to identify the sounds of several common instruments that you would find in the environment of music store or a big band—the sound that the shopkeeper himself makes once Simon leaves, saying "that fellow was pretty good. Huh. I should have asked him if he would like to play in our—."

But Rapso's statement on music goes beyond awareness and context of musical instruments. It is primarily one of social context. To quote a pioneering broadcast journalist Edward R Murrow, the role of television is to make the world aware of itself.[22] By creating a media platform through which children of different backgrounds can gain exposure to each other's music, they will have an increased awareness and understanding of each other. Implicit in all this is the idea that this will relive social and class tensions. Rapso was implying a social and ethical education based in context and understanding through attention.

This attitude, the social context of listening, is apparent in a number of musical skits on the program.

Case Study 1: Itzahk Pearlman and "What's Easy for You is Hard for Me"

> Fading in from black, there is a simple stage set with three folding chairs. On the third to the right is an instrument case. Entering from the bottom of the frame, a girl runs up the big grey steps to the stage and takes a

22. Davis, *Street Gang*, 54.

seat to the left, smiling. She looks in the direction she came from. Itzhak Pearlman enters with a cane in each hand. He begins to climb the steps to the stage, swinging each stiff leg up to the next level and climbing one step at a time.

There are three big steps, presumably made from grey plywood, and then a small step up to the stage. By the second step, the girl begins to fidget. By the third step her smile has faded and she looks to the side and kick her feet while she waits, perhaps to avoid staring.

Pearlman climbs the small remaining distance between the steps and the stage and turns to sit down.

"Ooff. Those steps," he says.

In order to bend at the waist and hips to sit, he unlocks his leg braces with an audible click and a rotation of his hips. He sits down and pulls his hands out of the metal rings of his canes.

"You know," he says, turning to the girl, "some things that are really easy for you are hard for me."

He picks up his violin and checks the tuning with two quick plucks with his fingerboard hand and then a quick bow across each adjacent string pair, eyes closed. His tone is rich and bright, even when tuning. He launches into an impressive flourish, starting with double stops followed by a long run up and down the fingerboard, ending with a right hand pizzicato chord. He does this all with a certain light effortlessness.

"Yeah, but some things are easy for you that are hard for me," the girl replies. She lifts her violin and plays a minor melody. She carries the tune, but her intonation is unstable.

> Pearlman tilts his head and leans in with appreciation as she plays. They both smile when she finishes.

The view of classical music which we gain access to here is not a traditional one. This is not a performance for an audience, but instead a intimate moment of discourse and vulnerability between two musicians. Here, classical music is not seen from the birds eye view, that of objective distance, looking over the musical landscape, but that of the bird listener listening along with. There is no audience in this skit, it is more about the interaction of the two musicians and how they listen to and acknowledge each other's lived experiences of music and the world. We may be watching from home as a television audience, bit what we see is not the somber performance of canonic works, nor is it an accessible presentation of a classical music program for non-initiates. What we are watching is a demonstration of ecological musical listening, of listening with.

One might object that this is *media*, and that what we are seeing is fake, a construction. That is, in fact, the case. However, that does not reduce the potential of an ecological reading of this skit, nor its efficacy as a demonstration. What we are seeing here is a representation of an empathetic and ecological experience and a sandboxed recreation of real life, inasmuch as the producers created an actual experience on the set which we can view the recording of—an experience which speaks to actual, lived, human encounters.

This encounter is no less real for being filmed. Pearlman actually limped up the tall steps onto the stage as he had done countless times outside of the *Sesame Street* set—this time was no easier than any other. The girl actually played as she has obviously done for hundreds of hours, and this time was no easier than any other. Though what we at home are seeing is a representation of a social encounter, it is a recreation of actual experiences.

And its sandboxing does not detract from its meaningfulness, but rather, it is only through this sandboxing that it can be made into entertainment and education such that it can contribute to an ethical education.

I say all of this to argue that an ecological reading and ecological education can come out of "constructed" media, that ultimately, it is not un-reality which is created, but a guided slice of reality, made in order to facilitate the ecological goal of awareness and context.

This next skit similarly features a disabled artist, deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. However, while the Perlman skit called attention to ability and disability, the following skit chooses not to address disability directly and instead focuses on on musical and social listening in the context of a classical music performance.

Case Study 2: Glennie and Linda

Glennie is first introduced by an off-screen voice: "And Now, Evelyn Glennie, world famous percussionist, will perform a duet with her friend Linda."

Glennie walks in followed by Linda.

"Now, I'll tell *you* when to come in. Okay," Glennie says, signing and speaking simultaneously, and hands Linda a single mallet."

Glennie launches into an impressive piece of solo classical marimba for four mallets.

At the beginning of an impressive run, Linda taps Glennie's shoulder.

"Now?" she signs and mouths.

"Not now, not now," Glennie responds, lifting her mallets. She continues

with the run down from the high end of the Marimba to the middle. A small hiccup at the end of the phase suggest that she is slightly flustered, but only slightly. She continues on to the next phrase, displacing Linda, who stands by her side watching closely, which each step as she moves up and down the instrument. With a massive run upwards she finishes the phrase and raises her mallets into the air. Linda taps her shoulder.

"*Now?*"

"Not now," Glennie shakes her head.

Glennie crosses the stage to an assortment of unhitched percussion instruments, including a snare drum and numerous cymbals and other pieces of resonant metal. Glennie plays a very modern sounding solo, impressive in its wash of timbres and coordination. At first Linda plays close attention, but after a few moments she starts to look bored and disappointed, crosses her arms, and lets her head droop.

Glennie plays a roll on the snare and looks at her partner expectantly. Linda is not listening. She tries again. The response is the same. Glennie taps the splash cymbal lightly. She pokes Linda's shoulder. She looks up.

"Now!" Glennie gestures at the cymbal with a large gesture.

Surprised, but excited, Linda raises her mallet and strikes the cymbal. The audience breaks out in applause. The two look at each other with a smile and shake hands.

They walk to the center stage and take a bow, first to the camera— representing the concert-hall audience—and then to each other. A girl walks up to them and hands Linda, the amateur, a bouquet of flowers. Glennie watches, miffed. She puts her hands on her hips and with a look of

shock and disappointment on her face. Linda, soaking up the applause, smiles, and hands Glennie back her mallet, a gesture much like the lead ballerina pulling a single rose out of her bouquet to hand to her partner. Glennie takes the mallet, and storms off the stage, frowning. Linda turns back to camera and smiles.

Whereas the first skit centered on ability and disability, this skit does not present the two deaf performers as encountering any difficulty, not including interpersonal relationships.

The first thing is that it normalizes deaf interaction.

Where the Pearlman skit highlighted his disability and difficulty, this skit presents normality.

In fact, it is a skit about listening.

The humor from this skit comes from their inability to listen to each other and from a lack of an understanding of what a duet is.

First Glennie is not playing fair with Linda, hogging the show, and then Linda is unfair to Glennie, but justifiably. This teaches about what is a duet.

This also gets into the territory of [childlike virtuosity on *Sesame Street.*](1053.md) This skit, along with many others on the program, seem like playing pretend in or of Carnegie Hall. It seems that we have adults pretending to be children pretending to be adults.

Part II

The Worm-Listener:
Parody, Virtuosity, and Childhood

Prologue: The Worm Listener

I spent something like a quarter of my life on the south side of Chicago. There was a summer during that period where I got into the habit of biking down to the 63rd street beach to comb the sandy shore for pebbles. There were two kinds that interested me: shiny black pieces of anthracite coal, and pale grey honeycombs of steel slag. Some thirty miles down the coast, at what now is the Indiana Dunes National Park, the beach is littered with pebbles of all kinds, glittering happily beneath the surf or ice of the ancient lake. Here, however, in the scorched earth left behind by the bonfire that built and destroyed America, the pebbles were largely fossils of that recent past.

That summer I went on a sound walk organized by the Midwest Society of Acoustic Ecology at the former site of the US Steel foundry. A section of the massive industrial campus had been re-wilded and returned to its pre-steel state of freshwater marsh. Some birds chirped, we saw an egret, but it had turned out to be one of those hot summer days where the air is still, heavy, and all the more stifling for its enveloping silence.

At some point the walk took us to a part of the wooded hammock where the artists had driven microphones—geophones—into the earth. When my turn came around I put on the headphones and listened.

I was immediately made aware of my on weight on the ground beneath me. Any small motion and I would hear myself in the microphone like an earthquake. Any large motion and the bugs, which I now realized were all around me, would stop and I would have to wait for some time before they started to move again.

I had never heard anything like it. It was a sound impossible to describe in terms of our air-based hearing. And I was part of it. The subterranean bugs heard

and responded to me just as I to them. Through the assistive technology of contact microphones and digital amplifiers, I was given access to the worm's-ear view of the ever-present world beneath my feet. The sounds were foreign, but in no way unpleasant. Is this the sound of an ant, a worm? I don't know, but I like it. For me as an air-based listener, this was the sonic experience of a complete outsider.

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The Bernstein Young Peoples Concerts...

Listening *with* the Music: Ecological Humor

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