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

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November 13, 2021

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 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] 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

The philosophy of music on *Sesame Street* was perhaps best summarized by Joe Rapso, the first music director of the program, at a press conference in 19xx. 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]

In other words, 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 philosophy of the co-awareness resonates with a theory of awareness presented by Jenny Odell.

Odell places attention as the center of ethics. We decide who is seen, who is

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.

heard, and who has agency, through acts of attention.[19]

Listening *with*

Case Study 1: 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 singe 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.

19. **Odell**.

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.

This skit does a number of things, and is unlike others that I have analyzed so far.

The first thing is that it normalizes deaf interaction.

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.

Listening *with* the Music: Ecological Humor

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