The Classical Musical Educiational 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 "STLPR: understanding starts here."

My ears perked up. What an intriguing declaration. It is not "STLPR: your source of news," or "STLPR: 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." 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]

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

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

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 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

3. Porter, *Lost Sound*, 185.
4. John Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," *The Review of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968): 409.
5. Ibid., 410.

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.*

6. Meany, "The Insitution of Public Television," 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.

References

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