**FASS Listening Experience Database Project Conference**

**Notes for 20 Minute Presentation .**

**Creating and Performing an Ethnography of Listening.**

***TELL THEM WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO DO:***

I am going to:

1. Quickly read The Abstract of the full Paper.

2 Briefly Tell you what the Hark Project is.

3. Describe the Performance Ethnography Project methodology.

4.

a) Read you some of the Performance Script,

b) Play you the parallel music on its own and then

c) Play them both together so you can get a feel for the listening event.

5. Tell you of some responses at the event including from the composer and me as conductor.

6. Touch upon some of the theoretical issues which the Performance Ethnography raises.

***1. INTRO: QUICKLY READ THE ABSTRACT.***

*This paper explores the expression of listeners’ significations after listening to a piece of orchestral music. It describes the dialogical creation and performance of an ethnographic evocation of the experience of listening – a Performance Ethnography of Listening. 40 members of 4 Listening Groups listened to a four-movement piece for string orchestra “Photography” by Errollyn Wallen and gave their responses which were taped and transcribed. A Source Text was created from the raw responses from which was written a Performance Script for two ‘voices’. The script was set within the time signature of the piece. A Listening Event was designed to enable, an audience including the Listening Group members, the composer, the conductor, the ethnographer, and the ‘voices’ (60 people) to listen to, and discuss a ‘triptych’ performance of the work – the central panel being the performed ethnography with the music. This paper describes the ethnographic process, includes the Performance Script and audio examples of the performed ethnography. It theorises our practice in terms of the work of: Nicholas Cook (1998) on the relationship between words and music; Anthony Gritten (2017) on intermedial practice; Lawrence Kramer (2011) on criteria for ekphrastic practice; and in the light of existing explorations in the HARK Project on, listening habitus, and listening repertoire – ‘auditory play’.*

***2. What is HARK*:** The HARK Listening Project, a collaboration between the Dept. of Social Anthropology and Music Research in the University of St Andrews, Scotland,

***3 .What did we do?***

We recruited 4 Listening Groups from concert-goers and amateur choral singers from the town and University. No members were professional musicians. The groups, 40 listeners in total, listened to varied curriculum of musical works, and all listened to “Photography” – a four-movement, 14 minute, instrumental composition for string orchestra by Errollyn Wallen.

The self-managed groups developed a way of working – listening to pieces, giving quick reactions and then discursive sharing of impressions and experience. What was recorded was what they said when they talked about the music. Some structure was introduced in the case of Photography. Members listened first without knowing what the piece was and gave their reactions to each movement; having heard the whole piece and learnt something of its provenance they gave further responses; after further listenings outside the group setting, some made further posts on the website. A transcript of all these reactions, responses and discussions was made. From this *Source Text* an *Ethnography of Listening* was written *–* an attempt to evoke, phenomenologically, the experience of listening to the piece.

The ethnographer listened again to the piece and made notes and impressions. The text fragments: images; descriptions of feelings; word-pictures; metaphors; and short narratives, from the 40 listeners, and from the ethnographer were arrayed in a time series, as a *Source Text*. This text was then written as a narrative ‘poem’ as a *Performance Script* within the time signature of the piece. The text was placed so that the musical motif that stimulated the listeners’ imaginations would precede their verbal responses as heard by the audience.

An ethnographic account is an attempt to describe and evoke the character of an everyday experience. In this case listening to a performance of a musical composition. This ethnography is a detailed, phenomenological, in–depth ‘thick description’ of a cultural practice – listening to music. This ethnography has five features, it is: *dialogical –* derived from many voices; *performative –* intended as an imaginative re-enacted evocation of a listening experience; *intermedial –* combines with different media,and *ekphrastic –* creates a new work of imagination as a response to an art-work. Whilst it was not intended to be representational or programmatic of the music it could be thought to be *hermeneutic* in the sense of offering an interpretation of the significance of the music to listeners.

The *Source Text* – raw material from first and subsequent listenings – was in the present tense (reactions) and in the past tense (responses). These strands were expressed in in two voices, male and female. The conversational, antiphonal aspect of two voices seemed to work but the result of gendered present (female) and past tenses (male), or vice versa was too static and did not. The immediate and reflective material was therefore reworked between the two voices. This created a relationship and a ‘conversation’ (not quite a duet) between two voices (not characters) and between a sense of reactive immediacy – often in questions – and more discursive descriptive commentary – feeling like a reply or answer. This also meant that each speaker could deploy these two registers: immediacy and reflection, in their expressive repertoire. More voices were added but later discarded because it made the performance too busy, so finally 40 listeners are represented by two voices.

It was, and is, an open question as to whether the ethnographer was perceiving order in the imaginations of others or imposing order on these raw material fragments. What was clear was that the material was intelligible and showed coherent clusters of metaphors, and a word-picture-driven narrative. The ethnographer used his responses to provide connective material between the flow of the fragments. Two short poetic fragments came to mind during this process which are quoted in the script. The performance script became about 75% dialogical group material, 15% ethnographer’s connective material, and 10% poetry quotation. By cutting and pasting a *Performance Script* was written into the musical score and bar-line cues were provided for the voices for performance.

***4. What does the text sound like on its own, as a prose-poem/ethnography ,and how does it work with the music?***

**A: Read them some of the second movement text, and then**

**B: Play them the same section with music only and then**

**C: Play them the music and words together.**

***5. What were people’s responses to the Performed Ethnography?***

**Choose some quotes from the following responses.**

**The Conductor.**

The findings of the recent study by Halpern et al. that investigated audience responses to repeated performance of the same work on a concert programme revealed: ‘on average perceived understanding… enjoyment and desire to hear the piece again [increased] in most cases.’ (Halpern, Chloe. Mullensiefen & Solboda 2017) Their study also touched on some performers’ perspectives of repeated performance, which is something that I would like to discuss just now. An integral part of the design of HARK’s performance of *Photography* was the triptych presentation that my colleague Huw outlined just a moment ago. I am fond of giving multiple performances of a work in a programme, it is not often done but it is far from uncommon. I nearly always feel that the ensemble and myself are more satisfied with the second performance, and knowing that there are two chances to get a piece right does relieve some of the pressure of performance. I myself had never before conducted the same piece *three* times attacca in a concert however, and I had no way of knowing how the players and I might respond to that – let alone how the addition of voices to the second of the three performances would influence the performance.

In summary, my experience from the podium was that it didn’t feel like we were starting from the beginning when we went back to the 1st bar for second and the third performances: each performance was successive to the last and the cumulative energy carried through in an uninterrupted line of intensity. My sense is that the ‘intensity curve’ (Rink & Berry DATE) of the performance as a whole was not only a result of the players and myself having multiple chances to settle into the score on stage. Had had have voices not been included in the second performance my experience of the intensity curve would have been different: their inclusion changed what Nicholas Cook would describe as the ‘combinatorial emergence’ of the performance, that is to say that the presence of the voices in the performance event caused everyone on stage to adapt in an unpredictable way. From my perspective, their presence was striking but so too was their absence in the third and final performance. I myself felt that in the third performance there was something shared between the stage and audience that was absent in the first performance. I apologise for this mystic description – conducting and conductors are far too prone to them. Future performed ethnographies could of course gather audience feedback about how their experience of the music changed during and subsequent to the performed ethnography.

One other perspective I can add to from the podium is my own experience of the relationship between the words and the music. The structure of the words exhibits a structure that matches the intensity curve of the music, this of course should be no surprise and only evidence of their symbiosis with each other. By ‘structure’, I mean what I call a ‘synoptic view’ (Cone 1968) of the music: music can be memorised in terms of its architecture and perceived atemporally as a ‘shape’. The music and the text, when viewed synoptically, exhibit to me the same shape both locally and globally. For example, the musical climax at the end of the first movement reflexively proclaims ‘and this, this is the Plateau. Behold, and this is where we are! Behold!’ Similarly, the Bach inspired counterpoint of second movement starts with the text ‘line drawing… drawing me out,’ and later asks, perhaps even of itself, ‘Are you an interlude? A hymn? A prayer?’ During the second performance I felt engaged with the way the music and text, or rather the instrumentalists and voices, animated each other in several such moments. Though the text was written subsequently and in response to the music, and the music not written for text; they did not exist in parallel during the performance.

**The Composer.**

Errollyn Wallen responded to the performance by saying that she was pleased and surprised by it and that it seemed new, like a ‘new genre’. She then spoke of the compositional process, the way in which the title ‘Photography’ was a kind of heuristic device to free her imagination to work with fragments and snap-shots but not in a literal or representational way. She spoke of the melodic line and Bach quotation in the second movement saying it began with Bach and ‘then became me’. In answering questions about the never ending sense of her relationship to the composition and it’s ‘finishedness’ as a work, she introduced a sense of its constant provisionality, as open to further interpretation and change, almost as a fluid ‘hyper-text’, and this clearly related to the relationship with the performance text. She was struck by the coincidence of the second movement images of a ‘love dance’ in the script between two people, noting that she had written it for the wedding of two of her friends as something in that mood. She described the relationship of the music to the words as ‘like a conversation’. She linked this to composition saying that ‘the words are now part of a conversation with the piece – this is a way of getting close to how things are made as well as how things are listened to..’ She emphasised how ‘atmosphere, place, texture’ which were features of the listening responses are important aspects of her compositional perspective.

**The Audience and the Listening Group Members.**

A lively discussion took place. In it the following observations were made:

The words ‘expressed the physicality of the music since I had a strong physical resonance with the sound’ (JT). The words had a ‘musicality as sounds themselves and they need not be thought of as having conventional meaning, but might be thought of a ‘place-holders’ – expressions of emotional/mental states or moods’. The words seemed sometimes ‘after-images’ of the sound (ND). It felt like a ‘collage’ representation of the listening group, it did not feel as if it had been assembled (PA). One listener spoke of the sense of time and space that the music and words created, and that this creates shifts in the perception of these verities, both the words and the music extending in time and space, and this has implications for the attention we give in listening (JP). For some it raised questions about ekphrasis, and the possibility that images could have ben chosen as the conversational medium (VT). Some picked up on the composer’s observation about the ‘intertextuality’ of all art-works and suggested that further music could also be engendered by listening to the piece. It was noted that we could now turn the ethnography into images to place with the music, adding another medium to the mix.

**The Voice/Singing Teacher.**

The singing teacher present made the following observation:

When you put words to music you are making something ‘other’, the music changes its function, it takes a ‘back-seat’ to the words, it, the music, becomes the commentary or accompaniment to the words. It is like watching a film the music adds intensity to the words….the music become an entirely different piece from the orchestral version, and I find it difficult to look at it in the same way….

There followed a lively discussion on whether the words had been ‘superimposed’, ‘put’ on to the music. It was noted that the relationship was not as a libretto where the words are in a direct relationship to the musical line and other musical elements. This led to a link with the visuality of the performance and its balance with the music. Several listeners spoke of the visual aspect of the performance and therefore a sense of watching music as well as hearing it.(JM) One person talked of the images it evoked for her and found them contrasting with those of the spoken responses (EC). One person simply felt that the words ‘got in the way of the music’ (BD).

***6. What theoretical issues did the Performed Ethnography project raise?***

1. Listeners gave rich accounts of their experiences of listening. Words and images emerge as creative imaginative responses and become text ‘fragments’.

2. In bringing the text fragments together dialogically, metaphors constellate/cluster as intersubjective shapes, as word-pictures/narrative, and these are valid and significant interpretive response to the sound/music. Words here seem place-holders for responses and states of being, as such they carry significance prior to semantic meanings.

3. These intersubjective accounts in words can be rendered ethnographically as a text that is intelligible and coherent, a ‘prose-poem’ which remains dependent on the music for its meaning.

4. The Performance Script can claim to be both evocative and interpretive of the music – creating a hermeneutic window on the piece of music.

5. This dialogic and authored ethnography of listening can be regarded as an ekphrastic art-work of evocation and homage to the sound/music.

6. The relationship between the sound/music and words In Nicholas Cook’s term were in *unitary conformance; non-contestation; and complementary*. We would add a further conceptual relation, that of *conversation* within performance.

7. Gritten’s approach drawing on Lyotard is more fruitful than Cook’s, drawing on a phenomenology of listening rather than conceptual relations between words and music. Their approach is consistent with the approach of Nancy, which implicates the resonant body, various states of attention, and pre-verbal expressions of significance (‘sighs’) – an imaginative and embodied relation of listeners to sound/music engendering further creative, intersubjective and

interpretive responses.

8. This project contributes to the ongoing theorizing in the HARK project which includes exploration of listening habitus, listening regimes, modes of engagement, a repertoire of listening styles (theorized as Auditory Play) and the emergence of a genre of interpretive ‘music-poetics’ which is exemplified in the Performance Ethnography of Photography by Errollyn Wallen.

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