

Then – Now

A guide to the Sean Streets ‘radio poem’

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BBC Radio 4

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/pip/mizd/>

<http://www.soundscapeproductions.co.uk>

This guide to the ‘radio-poem’ – ‘Then-Now’ includes the complete text of Seán Street’s poetic narrative used in the programme and a short commentary on the thinking behind the production of this experimental feature. You certainly don’t need to follow this guide to enjoy the ‘radio-poem’ it merely attempts to explain some of the ideas behind the production of the programme and how the recorded minutes were used. And, of course, it might help all the people who recorded a minute of their day at 6pm on November 9th last year to find their own recording within the layers of sound. Without all those wonderful volunteers this programme would not have been possible – many, many thanks to you all.

When all the ‘minutes’ started to arrive at the Soundscape Productions office by email, post and by hand I began to hear a highly eclectic mix of recordings, both in terms of content and audio quality, but I was determined to use every recording submitted - a total of 120 minutes. With such a diverse range of material there were hundreds of ways in which I could have combining the sounds – I could have made many different programmes out of the same material. [Having heard the programme on transmission tonight there are many things I could/would change!] Initially I divided the material into various themes – based on what people were doing at that time of day – working, commuting, cooking, playing and socialising/meetings.

I like to think that making a radio feature is rather like composing a piece of music – you introduce ideas, develop them add new opinions develop these and see how all the various views interact with one another. I decided that the ‘radio-poem’ should have a musical structure – a ‘symphony of sound’ in seven movements with an ‘overture’ and a ‘coda’. Seán’s poem was written at the same time as I was listening and editing and we became increasingly excited about the project through a series of long-distance phone conversations – bouncing ideas off one another. We gave ourselves a self-imposed deadline of 9th December to complete the process of editing and record the linking poetic narrative. This meant that the programme was recorded on the 9th, compiled on the 9th and transmitted on the 9th of three consecutive months. And that’s the only reason we chose the 9th November as the recording date. We did think

about the idea of recording on a significant date – Bonfire night, Halloween etc. but, as Seán said, that would have made the recordings like posed photographs and not snap-shots of life – which was what we wanted. The poem and the whole of Seán's introduction to the programme [the script of which can also be downloaded] was recorded and mixed at Gemini Audio Productions in London by Lance England and most of the editing and final mastering was completed by Warwick Pilmer at Clipstore in Leeds. So thanks are also due to them for their patience and understanding.

Again thanks to everyone involved in the project from BBC Radio 4 to all our contributors who gave a minute of their day to be part of this radio-experiment – 'Then-Now'

I

Overture [with Big Ben] 4'37"

This first section is really an Overture which introduces some of the people and sounds you will hear later in the 'poem'. It's constructed as a palindrome and opens with all the recordings playing together timed to the chimes of Big Ben and ends with the end of all the minute again timed to the rhythm of Big Ben – with one exception. One recording was made within earshot of the famous clock [with a peace campaigner outside the Houses of Parliament] and this has been moved to accompany the final six samples from all synchronous recorded minutes. In between are recordings of people who either credited the start of the minute, commentated on what they were doing or who recorded with radio and TV news bulletins in the background. After a central section which just uses actuality recordings of traffic etc. to accompany the middle section of Sean's poem we hear these voices again at a later point within their recorded minute before returning to the rhythms of Big Ben.

The evening 6 starts always with Big Ben.

6 to 6-01. Now – Then.

The top story, a Commons Terror row,

Blair's first lost vote. Then – Now.

Strange how the moment fades, the sepia grows.

When it becomes the past, who hears, who knows?

Each moment's our possession, while we inhabit it,

But suppose that we could be in someone else's minute.

An ordinary day, the day Blair lost the vote,

Dom bathed the kids, I walked on Bournemouth beach.

2005 the ninth of November.

A day to forget or remember.

Birthday, death-day, anniversary,

a day of daily happening, a link in time, without which

Time could not exist.

Hardly ordinary.

* * *

9/11. It has a certain ring,

American inversion, but that's a different thing.

9/11. An arbitrary date.

but by the time we know, already it's too late.

That 9/11 saw terrorism kill.

This 9/11, a failed new terror bill.

II Working 2' 27"

This section utilises all the recordings we were sent of people at work – typing, sending emails etc. and has been constructed rather like a Bach fugue with different 'voices' coming in at different times. There's office gossip chat which crossfades and intercuts between conversations hundreds of miles apart. It also introduces one of the features running through the programme - the abruptness of the end of all the recordings. Life carried on but our recorded minute stopped - so we hear conversations ending mid-way through sentences. The email fugue then begins again and finally a computer is switched off and home-workers reflect on their day before an office cleaner sweeps up all the memories of a November day at work.

**It all weaves to a music. Bach would understand,
Fugues and inventions emerging from the hand
Of serendipity, a cadence interrupted
sometimes mid-way through it's song
goes on and on, from then to now,
And out beyond – it's wireless after all.**

III Travelling 1' 48"

This section is self-explanatory as it mixes between all the recordings of the people who were travelling at 6pm on November 9th 2005. It shortens the journey home to just under 2 minutes!

**We can stretch Time – listen.
The minute multiplies but stays itself,
Blends to a music, becomes now again.
Time stretched beyond place,
Released from the cage of place
To become at once everywhere,
Elastic. And then is now.
For some it's time to start the car,
And head for home, the crawling queues await.
Unlock the bike, kick-start the dormant Yamaha,
And join the toxic river at the gate.**

* * *

**Recording this after a month gone by,
Those nows, sitting on the shelf, how can I
Know the context of you listening in your now,
December 9 to January 9 – how
Can I, locked in this past, how can I know
The circumstance, the news, the tabloid line
Of your now, 2006, January 9?
Here in my then I don't know how.
But you'll know – now.**

IV
Cooking 3' 17"

I really like this section – if only we could all cook a meal this quickly. When the recordings started to arrive it soon became obvious that ‘Then-Now’ could prepare a meal by merely using recordings which were made at the same time but featured different stages of the processes involved. The rhythmic nature of the chopping on one of the recordings suggested the start of the Fibonacci series of numbers – so with a bit more editing we managed to create a crescendo of chopping following this start of this series:- 1,1,2,3,5,8,13. The end of the sequence plays on the ambiguity of radio – who is being fed ‘when Mummy gets home’?

**Time's continuous moment is framed and frozen here,
It's happening now, just as we speak, listen, now, just there,
What are you doing now, out there, as you catch this history,
You in your current minute, while you're listening to me?
Other moments happening, now and now and now,
Others then that didn't get to this new now somehow,
All those minutes missing, that didn't get an ear,
That you might have recorded, but you didn't have the gear,
Or didn't get to think about recording time somewhere,
Or would have done but didn't know you can't be everywhere,
Or didn't think it worth the sound, or didn't even care,
That minute happened all the same in each and everywhere,
All those minutes missing, that didn't get an ear.**

V
Children Everywhere 3' 07"

In the same way that a meal could be prepared by editing together all the different recordings - in this section we discovered we could play with time in an even more ambitious way - we could make children grow up! Interestingly the recordings of children submitted seemed to be in pairs of children of the same age - so by synchronising them together in time we could place them left and right in the stereo image and mix between the two recordings rather like a 2-part invention. Then we gradually advance the age of the child duets and end up with grumpy teenagers! Framing this section are the infectious giggles of the brother and sister who we also hear in the middle of this section copying one another.

**Wireless once gave to the young the hour just gone, and there
It still is, whether radio knows or not – for “children everywhere”...**

VI

PastTimes 5' 20"

This final section of the poem which uses 'solo' of 'chamber' music combinations of voices and sounds takes us on a tour of gym clubs, swimming lessons – these 'sporty sounds' stop and become computer and pinball games, pubs, children's parties, meetings, training sessions, air-rifle practice, milking parlours etc. and music practice and rehearsal. One of the recordings of a guitarist practicing was interrupted by his mobile phone ringing – this then leads into all the minutes recorded which feature a phone conversation. The section ends very abruptly with a story about a dog coming to the UK – again our minute ends just too early!

**Time to vault the worker's wall, the six o'clock divide,
Escape the mental tussles of the sedentary day
And find another world to tax yourself outside,
Push your body, stay sharp and fit, keep in shape, this way.
Six o'clock, it's extra-mural time, time to meet
And make decisions about important things,
Beyond the routine day, there's more than work and eat
In life; it's quality of living when this bell rings,
And how we make that happen, and play our part
That brings us all together here. Order, now, let's start.**

VII

Coda: 'Ending – The Minute' 2' 34"

The sudden end to the previous section leads into the Coda and the closing verses of Sean's poem – about the sudden end to all our recorded minutes. This is accompanied by perhaps one of the saddest recordings – a kettle which is switched on at the start of the minute but takes longer than a minute to boil – so never does!

The next section of the poem introduces all the synchronised minutes at different times and builds into a crescendo of sound which again just abruptly ends.

**The everlasting rise and fall
Of the melody we choose to edit –
The cut so brutal, sudden, heartless, stark –
Exists beyond the confines of its minute,
Orchestra manoeuvres continuing in the dark.
All those minutes missing, that didn't get an ear,
People crossing rivers – be it Thames or Stour or Wear...
...Bridges crossed, babies bathed, trains about to go,
People ending working days, or starting up the show.
Here, coincident in time, and 60 days ago,
Are people touching people who they'll never ever know,
The simultaneous minute long since gone,
A hundred places' moment singing one song
This mystery, recorded radio makes.
Sharing 60 seconds, 30, 60 days ago,**

**A history, geography of one day's fragment,
Witness to what some of us were then
Gone now, moving away from another now
As this now, and this and this becomes then.**

...Now.

**And if we could hear each other's time, which in our place we miss,
Put all together in one space it would sound like this.**

'Then-Now' ends with all the minutes submitted playing together. But in this final cacophony of sound you should be able to hear your own 'radio poem' as your own ear and brain seeks out the characters, sounds and recordings you have already heard in the programme filtered through your own memories and experience. In fact every time I hear this final minute of the programme I hear a different version – I tune into different sounds and hear different echoes of all that's gone before. It's like the psycho-acoustic effect you often hear in 'minimalist' music – but I didn't have to do anything to achieve this effect [apart from standardise the levels all the recordings] it's just everything everyone sent – you mix it yourself!

Sean and I hope you have enjoyed listening to 'Then-Now' and we would be grateful to receive any comments of the programme at then.now@soundscapeproductions.co.uk

Thanks again to everyone who sent us their 6pm-6.01pm on Wednesday 9th November 2005 – this is your programme too.

Andy Cartwright
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Then Now was produced by Andy Cartwright and written by Sean Street
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