

Her Majesty's "Listening Subjects": Identification and Musical Form in Kenneth Doren's Monarchy, Suite for Birth

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Kenneth Doren's work embraces technology, popular culture and classical art forms. What appears paradoxical on first encounter soon resolves to an intrinsic logic traceable in works produced over the last several years. Doren's meticulous attention to detail, development and organic unity can be observed through close inspection of a single project, Monarchy, Suite for Birth. This work currently exists as completed concept and music, which will be staged in its full complexity in the near future. Monarchy uses as its premise a notorious conjuncture of events: the shocking and unexpected death of Diana, Princess of Wales, which provoked an unprecedented popular and media response, and the official reaction of the British Monarchy in the form of the Queen's televised eulogy of Diana. The music consists of the spoken eulogy, an "echo" or response sung in counterpoint by a mezzo soprano and samples from the orchestral work Suite for the Birthday of Prince Charles by Sir Michael Tippett. The whole has been divided into 36 looped compositions projected from parabolic speakers hung in a grid formation from the ceiling. The speakers ensure the relative autonomy of each segment for listeners situated directly beneath them. The work as a whole can only be experienced by a subject physically traversing the installation, literally constructing a personal performance. What is immensely compelling about this work, which Doren calls an experimental opera, is that rich musical form and sophisticated technology are used to analyze, abstract and reconstruct fragments of a complex public spectacle. The re-presentation permits us to experience our own ambivalence towards a remembered event and to assume a variety of subject positions relative to popular media culture. What results is a remarkably generous, affective, and polysemic work, which is best described in terms of an encounter.

Doren's work comes out of musical movements described variously as minimalism, sampling or plunderphonics. This last term has been used by Toronto sound artist John Oswald, who, quoting Stravinsky, claims that good composers do not imitate, they steal. The new digital technology has dramatically enhanced the ways in which music can be stolen and reinvented by creative composers (Oswald). This not-so-new phenomenon has precursors in the appropriation of folk tunes, motifs and variations one often finds in classical music. American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954), whose commitment to musicality and innovation inspires Doren, mixed elements of popular, sacred and patriotic music to evoke vibrant impressions of his culture and community. Ives' innovative use of dissonance, polytonality, tone cluster, multiple meter and counterpoint long predates their appearance in avant-garde composition (Teachout).

In the 1950s, contemporary music fell into one of two camps. The first, academic atonal or serial music, promoted by composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Karlheinz Stockhausen, emphasized abstract mathematical purity and complexity. The second comprised the chaotic, Dada-inspired happenings of avant-garde artists such as John Cage. Minimalism sought a third path prioritizing structure. Concentrated in discrete components, musical elements were repeated, stretched, inverted, played back or otherwise manipulated in a variety of ways (Schwarz 10-11). Initially, compositions were crudely performed on tape machines. The introduction of electronic synthesizers and sampling keyboards permitted sounds to be digitally recorded and played back with the stroke of a key, and digital music came of age. Much early electronic music embraced conceptual rigour and invention, reflecting its early allegiance to Minimal Art, with the consequent loss of appeal to all but the most

devoted audiences. However, when American composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich began to integrate materials gleaned from non-western sources such as African drumming, Indian ragas and Balinese gamelan music, they developed an unexpected following among younger audiences familiar with these approaches from rock music (Schwarz 78-79).

Steve Reich, one of the most gifted and thoughtful of the new composers, influences Doren. Realizing that mere imitation or appropriation of non-western musical styles was neither ethical nor effective, Reich sought to subvert the rhetoric of development and catharsis in Western music. He developed a method of composing that embodied non-Western principles of self-transcendence, repetition and stasis (Schwarz 72). Attracted to the complex polyrhythms of African drumming, he embarked on experiments such as playing identical sequences simultaneously on multiple tape recorders, which gradually slipped out of phase. He exploited the syntax and rhythms of human speech patterns, producing radical -- and relatively unlistenable -- works such as *It's going to rain* (1965). Not wishing to alienate audiences in the name of sterile experiments, Reich explored ways of re-injecting musicality into compositions in order to attract sympathetic listeners.

Different Trains, composed for the Kronos Quartet in 1988, was one such work. Reich combines the musical device of the ostinato, melodic bars that repeat in a compulsive rhythm, archival recordings of North American and European trains from the 1930s and 40s and dialogue samples to produce an extraordinary evocation of train travel. The first movement, *Before the war*, samples the voice of his governess, Virginia, reminiscing about transcontinental train trips she took with the young Reich as he shuffled between divorced parents living on opposite coasts. This is mixed with the mellifluous tones of a retired black porter, Lawrence Davis. The European section, in which the meaning of *different trains* is made apparent, incorporates voices of Holocaust survivors, who, as children, were transported in cattle trains to Auschwitz. The music of the piece develops from the natural rhythms and chromatics of the spoken voices; the haunting work is both representational invoking trains and journeys and expressive.

In discussing *Different Trains*, Naomi Cumming identifies three positions available to the listening subject. Depending on the nature of the relationship between the listener and the "object" represented by or in the music, these positions can be likened to what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic stages. The pre-symbolic Real "intrudes from outside signification," and can only be experienced symbolically by the speaking subject. The listener who immerses himself in the insistent, compulsive rhythm of the ostinato might be thought of as corresponding to this stage. Depending on related associations, passivity induced by the beat produces pleasurable regression or threatening loss of individuated self. The second position, corresponding to the Imaginary, allows the listener to identify with the content of the speech--to acknowledge the illusion created by representation and engaging rhythm--and yet to retain self-awareness. The third position, roughly equivalent to the Symbolic, corresponds to a distanced evaluation and heightened awareness of the structure, mechanics and formal arrangement of the work. Following the theories of feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, Cumming asserts that both the Real and the Imaginary open out or suggest spaces in which the pre-symbolic can be glimpsed. In Kristeva's opinion, powerful rhythms, themselves indexes of an articulated symbolic, are capable of evoking aspects of a pre-articulate state, which remain potential in the unconscious. Slipping between compulsive rhythms of the ostinato and empathetic awareness of the speakers activates a range of subject positions and response options. The grain or particular timbre of the human voices provokes identification with

the speakers. (Reich himself asked if one might not be better represented by a recording of one's voice than a photograph.) Repeating rhythms and fragments of speech suppress content in favour of what Reich calls 'the speech melody'. Repetition serves as a gesture, a sign pointing to the gap between representation itself and the unrepresentable Real (Cumming).

Because *Monarchy, Suite for Birth* is an installation, which must be physically experienced, analysis of the listening subject offers insight into structures and strategies of the work. *Monarchy* differs in significant ways from *Trains*, notably in the absence of references to the Holocaust, but similarities invite comparison. Both deal with the theme of death: public versus private, accidental versus instrumentally effected, publicly acknowledged versus suppressed or hidden. Both engage strategies appropriate to their particular subject and analysis. *Trains* deploys a sonorous envelope of sound, blending sirens, stringed instruments and voices, inviting identification, in part, on a pre-symbolic level. In contrast, *Monarchy* courts irony through severing the narrative and music into 36 discrete looped compositions. Kinesthetic identification is interrupted by computer blips characteristic of repeating loops. Movement between speakers is marked by a silent gap, which further interrupts participatory involvement by reinforcing self-awareness.

Ostinato is the primary determinant of pre-verbal, kinesthetic identification. In Reich's work, alignment with the driving rhythm permits subjective and ethical identification with the horror of the victims' predicament. In contrast, *Monarchy* disrupts any continuous rhythm, effectively proposing only two positions: empathetic but fully socialized identification and self-conscious analysis of form. This is neither accidental nor unmindful; instead, blocking the fully absorbed participatory state--described as being "in the groove"--is itself an ethical strategy. In this instance, it counters popular entertainment's tendency to degenerate into fascist spectacle. In other works by Doren, notably *Allegro molto con brio king kong* (1999), the ostinato plays an important part. Based on a Beethoven ballet, the appealing, syncopated rhythms of this work are parodied in spasmodic movements performed by three dancers. Despite rich musicality, uncritical identification is constantly challenged by the disruptive quirkiness of the libretto: "I like television because it entertains me... John Wayne one of the most American stars they call him the duke." When promoted by powerful state or commercial apparatuses, voluntary surrender of individual will and acceptance of seductively passive states facilitate fascism (Charles Keil, qtd. in Cumming). Popular entertainment walks a thin line between the pleasures of collective solidarity and the very real dangers of "fascinating fascism." Doren brackets that danger by forcing listeners to vigilantly maintain a certain level of critical self-awareness.

In Reich's work, hours of taped interviews were distilled to scraps of speech: from Chicago to New York . . . one of the fastest trains. The fragments recorded by Holocaust survivors are even briefer, yet defining: on my birthday . . . into those cattle wagons. Historical knowledge and emotional identification allow us to construct a harrowing narrative from these evocative elements. Reich's framing of the textual scraps within the envelope of sound is an act of preservation and ritual mourning. In *Monarchy*, the entire transcript of the Queen's address is presented in the 36 segments. The text represents a sort of seamless public authority, a unitary bulwark sequestering the eminence of Majesty from the domain of the ordinary citizen. Doren's fracturing of the Queen's speech comprises an act of political subversion--literally, breaching the wall. With repetition, Reich's text provokes pathos; we acknowledge racist and oppressive societal structures behind the rich timbre of the black porter's voice or the remembered terror of the adult survivors. Doren's repetition of the Queen's voice is ironic, as that which appears powerful and unassailable reveals itself

as mortal and fallible. Her idiosyncratic voice has not been altered, and, other than being fragmented, it is presented without comment. Paradoxically, the content of the speech becomes heightened rather than dissolved through repetition. Words and phrases resonate with double meanings, recalling the extraordinary tensions surrounding the funeral and speech. As Doren writes in the notes to the installation, the Monarchy, as an ideal of vested power is today in a precarious position. Its precariousness, now open to public re-evaluation and critique, is clearly articulated by Doren's staging.

Possible identification is hinted at by a second voice, mezzo soprano Patrice Jegou, who mirrors and echoes the Queen. Her gorgeous bel canto is familiar to us from *Allegro molto con brio* King Kong (1999), the libretto for which, as mentioned, addresses popular forms of cinema and television. Again returning to Cumming's Lacanian analysis of the listening subject, mirroring can be understood as a form of empathetic identification, marked by a (preliminary) recognition of difference between the self and other. This, Cumming suggests, can open a path for the listener into the narrative without impeding an awareness of self. Here we must return and attend closely to the score, as Jegou enters only intermittently against the complete text of the Queen. Her interventions cluster more towards the opening of the speech, which focuses on a personal tribute to Diana. Against the measured pronouncements of the Queen, the mezzo soprano soars, shifting in dynamics, range and tempo as she alternately echoes, queries and possibly mocks the Queen. Certain phrases stand out sharply: since the initial shock . . . incomprehension, anger and concern. . . These acts of kindness. As the speech moves almost imperceptibly from the personal (So what I say to you now, as a queen and a grandmother,) to the public (It is a chance to show the whole world the British nation united in grief and respect.), the singing voice grows less insistent, colder and more removed, as if the narrow corridor linking subject and sovereign through grief were closing over and hierarchical structures reasserting their due. Throughout the movement of the work we trace our own shifting and ambivalent responses to the public spectacle of tribute and grief.

A third element of meaning and structure is provided by the sampled score of Sir Michael Tippett's *Suite for the Birthday of Prince Charles*, composed in 1948. This instrumental work is divided into five movements, and portions of each are sampled and layered into five separate movements in the digital work. In terms of musical effect, Tippett's score provides *Monarchy* with its dominant source of tonality, orchestral colour and rhythmic density. In their sampled format, variations between the five movements are suppressed, yet we can still recognize the optimistic, expansive sound of the *Intrada*; the lyrical, tender refrains of the *Berceuse*, or lullaby; the plucky, mock-heroic melody of the *Procession and Dance*; the steady, martial rhythms of the *Carol*, and the fanfare and triumphant syncopation of the *Finale*. Doren thinks of Tippett as 'the citizen who, through good deeds, becomes the Knighted servant, but he was not simply a good soldier. Openly gay, a pacifist and occasional communist, Tippett's first success came with a work based on the story of a Jewish boy who had murdered a Nazi diplomat. His music aimed at transfiguring the everyday by a touch of the everlasting, creating images of abounding, generous and exuberant beauty (The Economist). His commitment to music that mattered makes him a mentor and partner to Doren, who similarly engages themes of spiritual and humanitarian import. In this context, Tippett's *Suite* poignantly references optimistic beginnings and the promise of birth, mitigating the depressing spectacle of wasted life and senseless death.

Like most people, I remember well being shocked by Diana's death, coming, as it did, so suddenly at the end of a long, quiet summer. A friend in London reported she also found herself surprisingly affected by the unfamiliar sight of London streets filled with stunned pedestrians, spontaneous memorials of flowers perfuming the air with oppressive sweetness and the pervasive aura of collective grief. Looking back now at media coverage, I am struck by the strident tone in many accounts, as if public grief for a popular figure were a fickle thing, unworthy of serious attention. Diana, in life and in death, was contrasted negatively to Mother Theresa, who passed away the same weekend. Simple response to her death was overridden by the complicated politics of Monarchy, sordid media reports of the last months of her blighted marriage, separation and divorce, and the presence at the funeral of so many entertainment superstars. If rituals such as public funerals are designed to ensure the dead remain truly dead, and not return as ghosts to haunt the living (Zizek 23), the Windsors had good reason to promote a sumptuous display. Yet public grief has its merits, too. Diana embodied a fairytale of mythic proportion, to which few of us are immune. Projected onto her public displays of temperament and glamour were many of our own insecurities, fantasies and fears. Grief at her death activated the release of multiple private sorrows, sublimated and transformed through the collective response. Democracy and popular culture are transformed through such widely expressed demonstrations of emotion, which demand to be acknowledged and attended to by those in power.

Monarchy, Suite for Birth provides a forum for the acknowledgment of popular culture on our lives. Moving throughout the installation, we experience thirty-six discrete bursts of sound, which we must collate and interpret. Fragmented, the Queen's eulogy lacks its imputed authority, allowing us to reflect upon it from our own experience and knowledge base. Media images, pop tunes and mythic narratives inundate contemporary life; we often underestimate the degree to which these enter into and shape our collective unconscious. By frustrating simple, kinesthetic identification, and, instead, articulating the imaginary and symbolic participatory positions, Doren makes these unconscious narratives manifest, available for examination and restructuring. Rather than endorse a false dichotomy between high culture--canonical art, music and literature--and popular arts, Doren reveals degrees to which traditional myth haunts the popular realm and classical music articulates our internal emotional landscape and desires. In so doing, he reinvigorates classical traditions and recuperates their richness and pleasures for a new audience.