

Beauchamp's Tenth Horse; Corwin, Reed, and Stoppard on Electroacoustic Music and Radio Sound Effects

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Abstract

Norman Corwin's *Double Concerto* (1941), Henry Reed's *A Hedge, Backwards* (1956), and Tom Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) are a collection of radio plays with striking similarities. Each is a comedy that features a fictional electroacoustic composer who imagines himself or herself a vanguard of innovation, and each features original electroacoustic compositions. From three vantages in time these radio plays explore ideas surrounding the composition, aesthetics, and criticism of electroacoustic music. Corwin composes with and discusses the potential of manipulated recorded sounds surprisingly early, in 1941. Fifteen years later in 1956, Reed focuses on the absurdity many must have heard in this new music following the first BBC broadcasts of electroacoustic music. Then in 1972, Stoppard looks back, positioning radio sound effects in the context of avant-garde experimentation in music and art in general. All three radio artists connect electroacoustic music and radio sound effects, audio arts with shared characteristics despite the vastly different settings they are heard in.

1. Introduction

Clock strikes four.

Mrs. Twombly. (*A gentle snoring.*)

Twombly (*arousing her*). Phoebe—Phoebe!

Mrs. Twombly (*sleepily*). What—what is it?

Twombly. Do you hear anything?

Mrs. Twombly. Hm?

Twombly. Listen! (*A silence*)

Mrs. Twombly. I don't hear anything. What's the matter with you?

Twombly. I thought I heard something.

Faintly at first, a weird effect of growling and moaning, in rhythmic pattern; over this, occasional loon cries, assorted whimpers, and now and then a groan. This goes on uninterruptedly under:

Twombly. There it is again!

Mrs. Twombly (*after a moment; scared silly*). Herbert! Herbert! It's—it's an animal of some kind!

Twombly. It's nothing I've ever heard before.

Mrs. Twombly. I'm scared to death, Herbert! Get dressed and wake up José!

Twombly (*no less frightened*). No, I—I don't want to disturb him.

New elements of weirdness.

Mrs. Twombly. Herbert—it must be ghosts!

Twombly. I—I don't know.

Mrs. Twombly. Get up and put on the lights.

Twombly. I—it will probably go away.

The effect grows more terrifying.

Mrs. Twombly. (*after a moment of this*). Get up and put on the light or I'll scream!

Twombly. No, don't scream, you'll wake up José.

Mrs. Twombly. (*with forced bravery*). Scared? Why, I—

The terrible noises come closer.

Twombly (*suddenly deflates; gulps; then meekly*). Yes.

Mrs. Twombly. (*really terrified*). What—what can it be?

Twombly (*hopefully*). Maybe it's the wind.... We'll find out in the morning.

*The effect sounds like anything but wind.*¹

Norman Corwin's 1941 radio play, *Double Concerto*, Henry Reed's *A Hedge, Backwards* from 1956, and Tom Stoppard's 1972 *Artist Descending a Staircase*, are all comedies featuring fictional composers of electroacoustic music and original electroacoustic compositions. I was very surprised when I discovered that there were three radio plays so similar, and as I looked closer I realized that the similarities went deeper. Most fascinating for me as a musicologist interested in both radio art and electroacoustic music – each radio playwright tells a narrative of radio sound effects becoming electroacoustic music. This mirrors the historical fact of early centers of electroacoustic experimentation being founded in radio stations, even using equipment meant for sound effects. But, to me it also seems an almost ubiquitous phenomenon

¹ Norman Corwin, "Double Concerto," in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 370-371.

for radio artists to wander into electroacoustic music territory as they experiment with sound or sound effects as a theme. I see it happening time and time again. And this set of radio plays is a convenient way to explore the sound effects to music process, which begins with sound as a functional replacement for the lack of sight but blossoms into something closer to sound as poetry or music. This presentation is preliminary research for a larger in-progress paper.

2. Corwin's *Double Concerto*

The earliest radio play of the three, *Double Concerto*, was written by Norman Corwin in 1941 for CBS's "Columbia Workshop" program.

Double Concerto is a story about José Zaragoza and Laszlo Poganyi, two feuding musicians, whose backfiring attempts at sabotage actually become catalysts for new musical compositions. Zaragoza has a scientist help him invent and record new sounds. His plan is to spook his rival Poganyi in his sleep by playing strange sounds through speakers hidden in the ceiling of Poganyi's bedroom. Zaragoza first tries the sounds out on a sleeping couple, the Twomblys, who are his house guests, this was the opening section of this presentation.

Poganyi, however, instead of being frightened is fascinated by the recordings and uses them in a new composition. He names his new style of music which blends acoustic instruments with manipulated recordings, "Poganyism."² This new music is praised by fictional critics in the radio play as adding to the "tonal palette and broadening the possibilities of modern composition."³

Corwin was very involved with the composition of this music. He directed a recording session with a vocal group he had worked with before in his radio poetry to perform extended vocal techniques in various polyphonic textures.

Corwin listened to the recordings at different speeds, selecting the ones he liked, and worked with a composer at CBS to make a piano accompaniment for two of the manipulated recordings. He titled the piece *Poganyi Divertimento No. 1*, and the result is an impressively early, short example of mixed music heard by millions over CBS in 1941. Perhaps this composition deserves a footnote in future histories of electroacoustic music.

3. Reed's *A Hedge, Backwards*

The second radio play is Henry Reed's *A Hedge, Backwards*. It was broadcast in 1956 on the BBC's Third Programme. It features a composer named Hilda Tablet who decides to dabble in the new *musique concrète* that was causing a buzz on the Continent and on the BBC. Here is Hilda Tablet's explanation of *musique concrète*:

² Norman Corwin, "Double Concerto," in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 377.

³ Ibid. Corwin composed this music in 1941, years before Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* experimentation. And Schaeffer was actually a fan of Corwin. In 1945, Schaeffer visited New York and spent time with Orson Wells, a frequent collaborator with Corwin, and returned to France with recordings of two of Corwin's radio plays, *Transatlantic Call* and *New York: A Tapestry for Radio*. Schaeffer even featured these recordings in his own radio production *Une Heure du monde* in 1946. *Double Concerto* was published in Corwin's second print anthology of radio plays in 1944 and easily available when Schaeffer was in New York in 1945.

- Hilda. I may say the music is going to be a pretty sharp smack on the you-know-what for the Consolidated Instrumentalists' so-called Union.
- Reeve. How have you managed that?
- Hilda. Conckers.
- Reeve. C...conckers, Hilda?
- Hilda. Musique concrète. Concrete music. You know about it?
- Reeve. No.
- Hilda. You tape it.
- Reeve. Tape it?
- Hilda. And dub it to disc after. (*instructively*) Of course, most of the johnnies who do it rely on pure sound, amplified and speeded up and reversed and so on. Needless to say, I have my own little line on the thing. For one thing, I think the discerning listener could probably tell you almost at once that my *musique concrète* is very much louder than anybody else's.
- Reeve. Is it really?
- Hilda. Oh, yes, quite a bit. Also, for fair measure I clamp in a few simple little haunting tunes of my own, repeated, over and over. That's why my own brand is called *musique concrète renforcée*; reinforced concrete music. Like to hear the block I've done for *Antony and Cleopatra*?⁴

Tablet then goes on to explain how the opening section was based on the sound of her female companion's dress zipper, which Tablet zips down and up repeatedly for her guests to hear, nearly disrobing the woman each time.

The performance of the piece is voiced over by Tablet, who begs her small audience to praise the music and also gives more insight to source material (her housekeeper's and her housekeeper's husband's heartbeats).

This music was composed by Donald Swann who first recorded the sounds of zippers, toy whistles, chimes, and kazoo melodies on disc, then, I assume, took these discs to a sound lab at the BBC that had a tape recorder and crafted the short compositions by reversing, modulating speeds, and isolating and looping samples.

Tablet's *musique concrète renforce* was timely satire. In 1954, the first broadcasts of French *musique concrète* aired on the BBC. Months before *A Hedge, Backwards* the first radio plays with electroacoustic scores were produced at the BBC. The excitement around new sounds led to the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's creation a year later in 1957.

⁴ Henry Reed, "A Hedge, Backwards," in *Hilda Tablet and Others: Four Pieces for Radio* (London: BBC, 1971), 130-131.

4. Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase*

Now moving on to the third radio play. It begins with a series of unexplained sound effects which are in-sequence: “an irregular droning noise,” the sounds of footsteps and creaking floorboards, a few seconds of silence, someone exclaiming “Ah! There you are,” two quick steps and a thump, followed by a cry as a man “falls heavily down the stairs, with a final sickening thump when he hits the bottom.”⁵

This is the opening of Tom Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* broadcast in 1972 on BBC Radio 3. The opening sequence is a recording of the death of Donner, one of three elderly bachelor flatmates—all self-proclaimed avant-garde artists since their youth. Another flatmate Beauchamp is a composer, and he was recording a tape music piece on the theme of silence when Donner fell to his death and captured Donner's last moments. Was it an accident or murder? The mystery is solved in the last scene where the recording is partially recreated coincidentally. We discover Donner was not murdered but simply chasing a fly when he fell down the stairs, turning this whole radio play into a sound effect gag centered around a piece of electroacoustic tape music.

Radio scripts are written in a specific way that puts the radio playwright in a certain relationship to sound. For authors like Corwin, Reed, and Stoppard there were basically three broad categories that each line of a script was forced into: words, music, or sound effects. Words are sounded out in human voices, music is sounded out in instruments or in singing, but sound effects must encompass every other sound. In some sense sound effects sit in between music and words, in between sounds generally meant to be listened to for euphony and sounds primarily meant to communicate specific ideas. Sound effects are untame moments in the semantic universe of narrative radio, a facet that the three authors featured in this presentation experiment with directly, their experiments woven into radio plays.

All three point out how sound effects can become music when composed in a certain way or when the listener is primed to listen in a certain way. Each radio artist points this out through making the music a joke, but for a radio artist—especially these three—to compare this sound based music to radio sound effects is a compliment. Sound effects are dynamic and eminently moldable, potent means to draw a listener into a narrative and create heightened listening experience. As the listener struggles to understand the sound effects' meaning in the narrative context they unavoidably listen deeply to the qualities of the sounds. That sounds can be used as raw material for music, outside of their narrative function as sound effects is a short step that Corwin expresses:

[*Double Concerto*] is radio slapstick in every respect: story, sound, music, even accent. However, the implications of Poganyi's device in *Divertimento No. 1* are legitimate enough. There is no reason why music should not be composed against rhythmic patterns of processed sound. [...] A limitless variety of qualities may be created by tinkering with speeds, fliters, reverberation and interference.⁶

⁵ Tom Stoppard, “Artist Descending a Staircase,” in Stoppard: The Plays for Radio 1964-1983 (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 115.

⁶ Norman Corwin, “Double Concerto,” in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 390.

All that is needed, Corwin seems to imply as he imagines a musical future, is a composer with enough ingenuity and imagination. Reed in *A Hedge, Backwards* and Stoppard in *Artist Descending* add that what is needed is also an enormous ego and the assumption that an audience will hear the sound in an intended way, almost as if a musical experience can be as staged as a radio sound effect.

5. Radio Sound Effects Treatises

Stoppard had originally wanted to write a radio play entirely in sound effects with only brief dialogue. He began to write this work but found it too hard, so he set it aside and instead wrote *Artist Descending a Staircase* which ended up becoming a treatise on radio sound effects in a way. Stoppard plays with sound effects throughout the work. The fourth and only other character in the radio play is a woman who becomes blind—a fellow listener—who constantly grasps for meaning in sounds. Ambiguity and deception seemed to especially interest Stoppard as well as the line between sound and music. Questions he explores through sound effect events are: How does the perception that a sound is being produced live or is a recording effect the listening experience? What kind of fantastical things can a listener be led to believe about a sound? How is the listening experience modified through directions on how to listen? And at length: how does a sound turn into music?

In one convoluted example, at the outbreak of WWI, during a flashback the three artists are in their youth and on a walking tour of the French countryside un-aware that Germany is invading France. Beauchamp is riding a horse, but well into the scene we learn that he has been clacking coconuts together not riding a horse. As Beauchamp fleshes out the horse through fantastic descriptions, the German cavalry rides by. There is a mixture of fake horse sound effects with real horse sound effects, but of course both sound effects are equally fake or equally real given different contexts.

Reed and Corwin also made treatises on sound effects, entire radio plays dedicated to explaining and dissecting sound effects.

In 1946, Henry Reed broadcast his first radio play—a feature called *Noises: Nasty and Nice*, written in collaboration with the pioneering nature recordist Ludwig Koch (1881-1974) for the BBC's newly created Third Programme. The recordings and scripts to this work have been lost, but we have a few descriptions from magazines and newspapers. One wrote, “the broadcast, in fact, was a short essay on the psychology of noises in which noises were used to play, wittily and suggestively, on the imagination of the listener.”⁷ It seems Reed's feature *Noises: Nasty and Nice* may have had similar themes as *Artist Descending a Staircase*, at least in the way that the sound effect event is broken down and explained repeatedly.

Corwin produced his radio play completely dedicated to radio sound effects in 1941, two months after *Double Concerto*. He titled the radio play, *Anatomy of Sound*, and wrote that it required “eight microphones, four sound men, 32 live effects, 21 recorded effects, 63 distinct cues, and the patience of two saints.”⁸ *Anatomy of Sound* was a series of sound effect

⁷ Marshall Armstrong, “The Spoken Word: An Abuse of Abuse,” in *The Listener* 28 November 1946, 767.

⁸ Norman Corwin, “Anatomy of Sound,” in *More by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 249.

experiments using sound to evoke location, affect, suspense, and comic punctuation. Some of these sounds he refers to as music or very close to music. He writes in *Anatomy of Sound*:

We have a platform regarding sound. Let it, like music, captivate the sense by metaphoric utterance, by mood-stuff and far-ranging concepts. Let it say things in terms of other things, dissolve and modulate and set up new vibrations in the deepest chambers of imagination.⁹

Directly after this statement, he again slows down records like in *Double Concerto*. First he plays a recording of a crowd, which he slows down and notes its resemblance to wind, over which the narrator crafts a metaphor about the power of wind and the power of people working together. Then he plays another recording:

Or listen to another crowd of people:

Second crowd effect.

Here, by changing speeds, these voices become surf . . .

Reduce speed of effect.

. . . surf booming in the night—eternal, like the sea itself. Here is the tide of humanity, sweeping from pole to pole; here re-enacts the restless drama of renewal, the charge of wave and wave and wave and wave upon the planetary shores.

*Fade effect.*¹⁰

6. Conclusion

Many national centers of electroacoustic music began at radio stations because of the presence of sound recording equipment, libraries of sound effects recordings, and other tools that could easily be turned to musical composition. Similarly, it was infatuation with sound effects that led Corwin, Reed, and Stoppard, who worked in a traditionally narrative, literary medium toward the use of sound effects as music and even to compose or commission short hybrid compositions – works that are electroacoustic music and radio sound effects at the same time.

These radio artists emphasized the use of contextualization, priming, and guidance —most often by embedded words— in the crafting of radio sound effect events. Often in electroacoustic music direct or embedded guided listening is not provided, as is in much radio drama. Yet titles, program notes, liner notes, interviews with composers, accompanying poetry, etc. intentionally create contextualization for the musical experience. In my view, when those contextualizations combine with the listening experience of a work of electroacoustic music a similar phenomenon to a radio sound effect event occurs. Radio sound effect events miniaturize this synthesis, sound out this process in an atomic way. The implications of this aesthetic overlap has led me to consider some bizarre questions that I would like to explore. Fittingly, both almost sound like

⁹ Ibid., 245-246.

¹⁰ Ibid., 246.

jokes: Can we approach radio sound effects as short moments of electroacoustic music? Or can we approach electroacoustic music as drawn out forms of radio sound effects, essentially as electroacoustic sound staged to be heard musically?

7. References

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