Voices from the Past: compositional approaches to using recorded speech

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This paper investigates some of the ways in which composers and sound artists have used recordings of speech, especially in works mediated by technology. It will consider this within a wider context of spoken word, text composition and performance-based genres such as sound poetry. It will attempt to categorise some of the compositional techniques that may be used to work with speech, make specific reference to archive and oral history material and attempt to draw some conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of speech or the spoken word as the primary material for sonic composition far predates the advent of recorded sound:

> . . . oral poetry, and therefore in at least one of its senses text-sound art, has roots that go back into prehistory, since the very earliest forms of poetic expression sought to explore the limits and boundaries of expression in the human voice. (Hugill, http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/3/index.html)

More recently, the performative vocal and noise experiments of the Russian and Italian Futurists and the Dadaists attempted to extend the limits of language and vocal expression. The ability to record and manipulate sound material including spoken word has, however, allowed a variety of work to develop that has both differences and commonalities which, if not actually adding up to a genre, may amount to subcategories within the larger umbrella of sonic composition. This paper will investigate some of those works to try and find compositional approaches and techniques that they may have in common. It will look specifically at works which incorporate archive or oral history material within that framework with a view to establishing whether there is a substantial difference in the way that this material is treated. The paper will not deal with (although it may refer to) songs or works that use voice with a musical accompaniment, or, in general, with contemporary sound poetry which is concerned with abstract and wordless qualities of utterance, although it will survey some of the early roots of sound poetry. In general it will not investigate works which use words in languages other than English (although it may refer to them) except in cases where there is a language that is designed to cross linguistic boundaries. It will also not look at contemporary word-based forms such as rap. It will primarily investigate works which use words, often as a primary source, and in general play with the tension between their semantic and abstract musical characteristics mainly through the power of technology.

> . . . a poem or a symphony in which the phonograph will play a part might well consist of noises artistically chosen and lyrically combined or juxtaposed. (Apollinaire in Kahn 1992: 9)

The history of the creative manipulation of words in the last hundred years is, in common with other areas of sound art, disparate and spasmodic. It draws on a number of different areas which include music, poetry, visual art, phonography, typography and literature. There have been intermittent flurries of activity in different countries at different times, many have emanated from the theories and activities in Europe at the turn of the century when, in Italy, Marinetti conceived his *parole in libertà* (words in freedom) which involved

> . . . ditching conventional syntax, approaching the printed page as an arena for typographical dynamism, and using words to mimic the sounds of the world as directly as possible to reproduce the 'countless noises of matter in motion'. (Cowley 2002: 195)

The Russian Futurists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov inaugurated Zaum poetry or transrational speech,

> Dislocated syntax, lullaby trills, nonsensical word making, children's rhymes, weirdly 'drawn' poems with doodlelike graphics, startling imagistic juxtapositions, paper collage texts, mirrored lettering, and concrete poetry were among their many common linguistic innovations. (Gordon 1992: 211)

and Mayakovsky issued his manifesto *Declaration of the Word as Such*

> . . . promoting the physical properties of language and specifically its existence as sound. (Cowley 2002: 196)

Meanwhile, at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Hans Arp experimented with sound poetry that they hoped would transcend national language barriers.

Organised Sound **11**(1): 3–11 © 2006 Cambridge University Press. Printed in the United Kingdom. doi:10.1017/S1355771806000021

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771806000021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In general, these practitioners had ideas about the alchemy of the word beyond its established meaning and were both searching for a more personal form of verbal expression and rebelling against languages whose meaning was frozen and therefore limited in what they could express. Later, the Dadaists and Surrealists took up the mantle of linguistic play and theory. Apollinaire's play *Les Mamalles de Tirésias* expanded the use of language beyond the conveyance of semantic meaning through his use of wordplay, accent, timbral change and phonemes (Schiff 1992), and in Germany, Schwitters began work on *Ursonate.*

Up to this point, sound poetry or phonetic art was primarily a performance-based activity. The coming of the tape recorder and the ability to record both reinvigorated and developed phonetic composition and blurred the boundaries between sound art, poetry and *musique concrète*. Some of the terms that have been suggested for this compositional activity point to the varied sources and disciplines that they draw on:

> 'Métapoésie' (Altagor [=Jean Vernier]), 'text-sound composition' (Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Sten Hanson, Bengt Emil Johnson), 'Instrumentation verbale' (Jean-Louis Brau), 'audio-poemes', 'poésie sonore/electronique' (Henri Chopin), 'Lautprozesse' (Carlfriedrich Claus), 'concrete sound poetry' (Bob Cobbing), 'Verbosonie' (Herman Damen), 'Ultra-Lettrisme', 'Crirythme', 'Musique concrète vocale' (François Dufrêne), 'Poèmes partitions'/'poésie sonore' (Bernard Heidsieck), 'poèmes lettristes', 'lettrisme sonore' (Isidore Isou), 'Audiotettura', 'poesia sonora' (Arrigo Lora-Totino), 'artikulationen' (Franz Mon), 'Verbophonie' (Arthur Petronio), 'Akustische' and 'Optische Lautgedichte' (Josef Anton Riedl), 'auditive poesie', 'lautgedichte' (Gerhard Ruhm), 'skribentische Lautpoesie' (Valeri Scherstjanoi), 'sonorisierte audiovisuelle Gedichte' (Paul de Vree), 'Megapneumes' (Gil J. Wolman). (Lentz, http://ncca.smufsa.nu/pr_sonorus.php3?lang=eng&t=0&p=9)

Subsequently there have been small explosions of text sound work at various times in various places from luminaries such as Gysin and Burroughs, Charles Amirkhanian, John Cage, Robert Ashley, Joan La Barbara and many others. In addition, composers such as Luciano Berio, Charles Dodge, Trevor Wishart and Paul Lansky have taken the spoken word as a major compositional interest, and others such as Steve Reich have incorporated speech from a number of sources into their works.

2. SOME CATEGORIES OF WORKS USING SPOKEN WORD

In order to investigate the compositional approaches and techniques that some of these works may have in common, I have attempted to identify a number of possible broad categories of works that use spoken word. The categories, of course, all overlap with each other as creative work is not by and large a categorisable activity; however, this gives some idea of the range of work covered in this paper. The primary split is between works in which a semantic discourse is dominant and works in which a more abstract discourse is dominant. This is down to both compositional intent – what is the work 'about', and interest – what is the nature of the composer's engagement with the speech material, as well as the compositional technique which allows the successful, or not, articulation of intent and interest. There is, however, also a significant difference between works where the speech is initially scripted or rehearsed in some way and then read into the microphone; work in which the material is gathered from either everyday conversation or through interviews or work which uses recordings taken from a pre-existing archival source.

2.1. Works where the words are initially scripted or scored

Of these three, the first category, works where the words are initially scripted or scored, rehearsed, read into the microphone and recorded, or performed, covers a range of work from sound poetry to the works of the Swedish text sound composers. In some of them the semantic discourse is dominant and others are more abstract. Some are pure explorations of spoken word and utterance, others have a purpose or intent beyond the sonic. I would also like to include in this category some of the work of Paul Lansky, the cut-up tape experiments of Burroughs and Gysin, and works such as *Vox 5* (1979–1986) by Trevor Wishart.

2.2. Work where the material is gathered from either everyday conversations or interviews

In the second category of work, material is gathered from either everyday conversation or through interviews. This includes Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy*, particularly *The Idea of North* (1967) which uses contrapuntal voices relating their experiences, in their own words, to build up an overall picture and atmosphere. Similarly, Randy Hostetler's 1986 work *Happily Ever After* uses sixty-four different voices, all speaking naturalistically, sometimes one at a time, sometimes overlapping; some telling real-life stories, some imaginary; all linked by the phrase 'once upon a time . . .'. Overall this builds up an idea of community, generations, and most of all story, in all its manifestations. In many ways the author's own work *The Memory Machine*, made in collaboration with Nye Parry (*Organised Sound* **10**(2)) works in much the same way in that it collects the recorded memories of those who participate and gradually changes them by fragmenting and mixing them. The voices build up an overall sound which communicates multiple memories

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771806000021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and combines to form a collective memory of a time or place. The experience of Graeme Miller's *Linked*, a sound installation that takes the form of a site-specific walk through an area of East London which has experienced radical and recent change, is similar. The listener walks the route and picks up transmissions of voices relating their memories and experiences from various transmitters along the way.

Each of those works has been made for different formats – *The Idea of North* is a radio documentary; *Happily Ever After* is a CD release; *The Memory Machine* is an interactive sound installation; and *Linked* is a site-specific sound installation. Other examples of work using multi-voiced material drawn from interviews include Pamela Z's *Geekspeak*, as well as works that utilise the voice of one person, such as Katharine Norman's *In Her Own Time*, focusing on her mother's reminiscences of London in the Blitz; Trevor Wishart's *Blue Tulips* and Larry Austin's *Djuro's Tree*. This category lends itself very well to sonic portraiture of a person or a group of people and often combines spoken word with sounds that enhance the understanding of the subject. Although in some cases these will include some 'musical' sound manipulation and processing, the primary interest is in the narrative content of the speakers.

2.3. Works which use material from pre-existing archival sources

In the third category, work which uses material taken from a pre-existing archival source, there is a relative dearth of examples, although I feel that this is likely to also increase in line with the rate of creation of new digital archives. Notable examples in this category include Trevor Wishart's *Two Women* (1998), which primarily uses material taken from Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher, and *American Triptych* (1999), which uses speeches by Martin Luther King, Neil Armstrong and Elvis Presley; Cathy Lane's *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory* (2001), which uses material taken from a small local East London archive; Nye Parry's *Boomtown* (1998), which utilises oral history recordings from Oldham; Gavin Bryer's *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969), which has incorporated recordings from eye witnesses in different recordings; Åke Hodell's *Mr Smith in Rhodesia* (1970), one of the few text sound works which uses some non-scripted material, in this case recordings of Ian Smith, former Prime Minister of Rhodesia; Lisa Whistlecroft's work *For the Railways* (1996), which utilises the recorded voice of Lenin; Joseph Anderson's *ChAnGE'S MUSIC* (1996), a work both about and featuring the voice of John Cage; Steve Wadhams' *Harley* (1996), made with material extracted from another documentary source; and, most notable, the works of Steve Reich, ranging from *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966) to *Different Trains* (1988), *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* (2002), in which he mixes archive and interview material. Some of these works will be analysed in more depth later in this paper.

3. SOME COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES USED IN SPOKEN WORD WORK

In the following section I have identified some of the main compositional techniques that have been used in spoken word pieces. This list is undoubtedly not exhaustive and many of the effects, techniques and processes mentioned below can be used in many ways.

(1) *Dissolution of semantic meaning through processing.* The semantic meaning of a word or phrase is dissolved through a processing effect such as layering, overwhelming reverberation, reversed echo, spectral processing, etc., e.g. Steve Reich *Come Out* (this could almost as easily be an example for the accumulation of meaning through processing; see below, especially (6)).

(2) *Dissolution of semantic meaning through deconstruction.* Words are split into their component syllables or smaller units and are used acousmatically, e.g. Lettrist sound poet Isidore Isou's reduction of words into particles; ultra-lettrist François Dufrêne's crirhythms, and sections of my own work *Hidden Lives* (1999) (see accompanying CD). In some way, Burrough's cut-up techniques could also be said to do the same for phrases (see below for a discussion of this).

(3) *Dissolution of semantic meaning through sonic translation or equivalence.* Meaning of words or phrases are translated or transferred into a sound equivalent where the semantic meaning is not quite so apparent and which requires a different kind of understanding, e.g. the use of sonic metaphor in Wishart's *Red Bird.*

(4) *Accumulation of meaning by sonic association.* Semantic meaning of words is reinforced by the additional use of other sounds relating to the text, e.g. the sound of the object that is mentioned (the sea for the sea), or by morphologically similar material, e.g. text about the sea is complemented with 'flowing' or 'undulating' sounds.

(5) *Accumulation of meaning through performance.* Human expression is the focus of the work and the dramatic narrative according to the emotive aspects of the vocal usage, e.g. Berio's *Visage*; many works by sound poets.

> . . . 'phatic poems', poems in which semantic meaning, if any, is subordinate to expression of intonation, thus yielding a new emotional meaning which is relatively remote from any semiotic significance on the part of words which happen to be included. If, for example,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771806000021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> one were to wail the words 'blue' and 'night' repeatedly over a period of time, the initial function of those words to establish a frame for the wail would soon become unimportant by comparison with the musicality of the wail itself and the residual meaning of the two words would come to seem more like an allusion than a conveyor of meaning. One would have, in effect, an invocation without anything specific being invoked. (D. Higgins, http://www.ubu.com/papers/higgins_sound.html)

(6) *Accumulation of meaning by semantic extension or elaboration.* This is often achieved through processing, e.g. Wishart's *Two Women* and *American Triptych*.

(7) *Accumulation of meaning by structural association.* Meaning is reinforced by the way that the text is manipulated and structured, e.g. compositional techniques used in madrigals, Pamela Z's *Geekspeak*.

(8) *Accumulation of meaning by massing of voices or montage.* Meaning is reinforced by the way that different voices come in saying either the same words or different things which build up and reinforce a total picture. This is an extremely common device, e.g. Randy Hostetler's *Happily Ever After*, Cathy Lane's *Hidden Lives*, Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North*, among others.

(9) *Retention of meaning.* Words are presented as recorded with no apparent processing.

The next five categories are less about the use of speech or the text and more about the place of speech in the piece overall.

(10) *Melodic or rhythmic extraction, translation and elaboration.* The melodies or rhythms of the spoken word are extracted and taken up by other elements in the work, again this may reinforce meaning but it also may be a purely abstract device, e.g. Paul de Marinis's works included on *Music as a Second Language* (1991) which deals primarily with speech melodies as musical material, as does Lansky's *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion* (1978–1979) and Steve Reich's *Different Trains.*

(11) *Narrative content or context.* A piece of music that is built around a pre-existing (often well-known) text, for example electroacoustic transformations of poetry or prose, e.g. Berio's *Thema-Omaggio a Joyce* (1958), Paul Lansky's *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion*, or even about an event, e.g. *The Sinking of the Titanic* by Gavin Briars.

(12) *Narrative guidance.* Text spoken by a lead or authoritative voice which guides the listener through the work, e.g. Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989) or Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice.*

(13) *Narrative suggestion.* Vocal events are not foregrounded but used to indicate human presence or human activity, e.g. Katharine Norman's *People Underground* (1996).

(14) *Phonetic excitation*. The voice is used to articulate some other source of resonance, e.g. architectural space as in Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) or synthesizer such as a vocoder.

The last five categories are concerned with wordplay which emphasises the semantic quality of the words.

(15) *Semantic juxtaposition and permutation*. Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles* (as described by Schiff, in Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 145) or the ordering and re-ordering of words in pieces such as *Junk is no good baby* (1960–1981) by Gysin, Burroughs' cut-ups, Cage's use of mesostics in works such as *Roaratorio* (1979), *Song Books* (1970) and *63 Mesostics Re Merce Cunningham* (1971).

> In the summer of 1959 Brion Gysin painter and writer cut newspaper articles into sections and rearranged the sections at random. Minutes to Go resulted from this initial cut-up experiment. Minutes to Go contains unedited unchanged cut ups emerging as quite coherent and meaningful prose. The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. And used by the moving and still camera. In fact all street shots from movie or still cameras are by the unpredictable factors of passers by and juxtaposition cut-ups. And photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents . . . writers will tell you the same. (Burroughs, http://www.ubu.com/papers/burroughs_gysin.html)

(16) *Nonsense juxtaposition and permutation including the inventing of new words*. A whole new language is not invented but new words are dropped into existing language.

> Some sound poets have claimed ancestry in Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky in Through the Looking Glass (1972), Christian Morgenstern's sematically opaque 'kroklolwafzi' (around 1890) and Paul Scheerbart's poem 'kikakoku!' (1897). In 1967 Henri Chopin composed Frogs of Aristophanes acknowledging sound poetry elements in ancient Greek drama. (Cowley 2002: 196)

(17) *New languages or metalanguages*. Languages are made up out of plausibly sounding phonemes from existing languages, e.g. Kruchenkykh's *Zaum* poetry, McClure's *Beast* language,

> . . . a mammalian communication based on a commonality of meat, with a voice that, as McClure says 'comes right out of my muscles'. (Kahn 2001: 339)

and Paul Lansky's *Idle Chatter* series.

(18) *Computer-generated and synthesised speech*. For example, Charles Dodge's extensive experiments

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with speech and vocal synthesis as in works such as *Speech Songs* (1972), or material with speech-like characteristics generated by the computer, e.g. Paul Lansky's *Idle Chatter.*

(19) *Composing text as part of the compositional process*. For example, Paul Lansky's *Now and Then* (1991) and *Things She Carried* (1995–1996).[1]

4. EXAMINATION OF SELECTED WORKS

In the remainder of the paper I will look more closely at some works from different eras and styles, and examine some of the techniques and ideas used with these strategies in mind before attempting to draw some conclusions.

4.1. *Cybo*: Lars Gunnar Bodin

Lars Gunnar Bodin's 1967 work *Cybo II* (commissioned for Swedish Radio) explores a world through its language. After an initial statement from a well-spoken and enunciated female voice over a high-pitched electronic sound, numerous voices simultaneously issue short bursts of words. It is difficult to understand them. An interruption by something sounding like a switch leads into a chorus of voices speaking about an undisclosed quasi-scientific process. The vocal density clears to a single voice and two male voices describe what can be seen in a number of squares. The listener is left with the distinct feeling that the work is about something of note but unsure about exactly what. I suspect the work is scripted like a play but the voices sound as if they come from an old radio broadcast, they have weight and authority. Bodin's progamme notes are not elucidating:

> The language which I have used in 'composing' the text is taken from a sphere of technical science, a language which is not normally considered to have any poetic value. Each sound has a phonemic significance. (Ubuweb.com)

The words in *Cybo II* are, by and large, meant to be understood semantically; they don't really make sense but each snippet serves to build up an atmosphere or scenario of important scientific activity, the delivery of the words is almost more important, the listener needs to understand the content but not necessarily the words, the words themselves are representative of and signifying something else. Atmosphere is also created by what appear to be strange electronic current, drones and switch sounds. There is a small amount of processing which elaborates the sense of the words of 'I feel evaporated', but otherwise the words are unprocessed. According to Hugill it is

> . . . an obvious example of making critical artistic statements about society by accentuating the form of that which is the subject of criticism. (Hugill, http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/3/index.html)

4.2. *Geekspeak*: Pamela Z

This is also what happens in Pamela Z's 1995 piece *Geekspeak* where she playfully utilises material from interviews with computer engineers discussing, reflecting on and defining their own geekiness. The pace is fast, remniscent of the work of Negativland; phrases with their own speech rhythm and melody repeat; semantic meaning remains uppermost. The piece is almost a music documentary, the tone, light and humorous.

> But even though it may be lightweight and humorous on the outside, Geekspeak comments insidiously on the darker implications of some disconcerting binaries. And it does so by means of some disarmingly ordinary tricks. On the whole words remain perfectly intelligible, and the verbal content is exposed, rather than being turned to purely sonic ends. However the content is edited into short phrases and repetitions, and forced to participate in musical games. The piece cheerfully dismantles grammatical sense and thus draws attention to the non verbal communication of diction, accent, turns of phrase and vocal mannerisms. (Norman 2004: 116)

Meaning is also accumulated through sonic association with the buzzes of the computer room and slightly robotic voices in the repeated background riff 'bit baud byte'. It is obvious that these really are computer engineers – their voices, their hesitations emphasised by the composer and their naturalistic delivery is important, this would not work with people reading transcripts. Looping, repetition, speed and the quick, brutal editing of phrases, structure the material to remind the listener of the edgy environment of the computer nerd. The montage of voices keeps the interest moving along and meaning is never hidden by processing.

4.3. *Hidden Lives*: Cathy Lane

For my own piece *Hidden Lives*, a number of women were asked to read from *The Book of Hints and Wrinkles*, a small piece of social history from the 1930s which describes how women should manage both their houses and themselves. Each reader read the same text and also a different section of text and determined their 'performance' of the text to the microphone which resulted in a variety of tone, timbre and delivery. Katharine Norman has commented on the choice of the reading voices for this piece:

> The voices depict and comment simultaneously . . . They read in an unaffected manner and their voices are well modulated and easy to understand . . . We hear their dignity in relation to their indignation at the text they are encountering. And, after all, it is a piece about indignity beyond words. (Norman 2004: 112–13)

[1] I am grateful to Dr Edward Kelly for his initial thoughts on these definitions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771806000021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Over the duration of the work, the treatment of the text moves from dispersal to accumulation of meaning. The initial heavy processing gives way to abrupt deconstruction of component syllables which becomes, over time, less abrupt as larger chunks and then whole words are occasionally heard until the massed voices chorus to proclaim the words in a solid block. The composer has attempted to reinforce the sense of the words, or rather the world that they are describing by structuring them as if moving through a series of different rooms in a house, and the spatial claustrophobia of the work serves to emphasise the meaning and context.

> It is not until about seven minutes into the piece that intelligible words start to emerge. Prior to this, the sound world is made from flurries of vocal fragments (all women's voices – this is very clear from the timbre) that gradually build into swishing, repetitive surges before subsiding again. These repetitive rhythmic waves are too fast to be soothing, and have a sense of industry that is perhaps reminiscent of sweeping, scrubbing or polishing. There are fleeting moments where fragments become phonemes and a vowel sound leans towards the possibility of speech. Despite the natures of the sounds – soft unvoiced, ephemeral – there is a kind of frantic urgency throughout. The imprisoned speaking voice – an identity that has been cut into tiny pieces – is somehow masked or trapped beyond communication, but is most definitely there. (Norman 2004: 111)

The heavy editing of the words in *Hidden Lives* deprives the speakers of their language and expression.

4.4. Various works: John Cage

Cage's use of mesostics in works such as *Roaratorio*, *Song Books* and *63 Mesostics Re Merce Cunningham* was for him a way of making

> . . . English less understandable. Because when it's understandable, well, people control one another, and the poetry disappears – and as I was talking with my friend Norman O. Brown, and he said 'Syntax [which is what makes things understandable] is the army, is the arrangement of the army . . . So what we're doing when we make language un-understandable is we're demilitarising it, so that we can do our living . . . (Cage 1974, http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/dage-radio.html)

The sense of the writings from Thoreau's journal in *Empty Words* is dispersed and deconstructed as the text gradually breaks down from meaning to glossolalia.

> Empty Words begins by omitting sentences, has only phrase, words, syllables and letters. The second part omits the phrases, has only words, syllables and letters. The third part omits the words, has only syllables and letters. And the last part . . . has nothing but letters and sounds. (Cage radio interview 1974, http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/dage-radio.html)

The recording of *Song Books I–II* and *Empty Words III* (Wergo WER 6074-2) results in a heady and bewildering mix utilising, however briefly, many of the categories suggested above.

4.5. Various works: William Burroughs

Burroughs, like Cage, works with his own voice reading his own writings.

> The tape re-order experiments . . . represent most explicitly his exploration of voice, of the word's relationship to the body, of the proliferation of the word by the mass media and of the word as a weapon of illusion and control. Burroughs' goal in these experiments is always 'break through' – the explosion of pre-recorded words, associations and identity. (Lydenberg 1992: 410)

In cutting up the text, Burroughs is almost trying to break the code implicit in the words. But in works such as *K-9 was in Combat with the Alien Mind Screens* (1965), *Recalling all Active Agents* (1960) and *Working with the Popular Forces* (mid 1960s), the choice of materials, with their militaristic derivation and allusion combined with their delivery, makes them sound a little like documentary recordings from the American media.

> ('Shift Coordinate points', 'Recalling All Active Agents' 'Cut all tape'), Burroughs produces the effect of messages crackling through battle with the walkie talkie immediacy that characterises the cut up style. (Lydenberg 1992: 415)

Burroughs is processing the recorded sound and performing the text in order to give it an association and authority. His material is often taken from the newspaper or radio, not as a recording, but transcribed and read by his own voice, his interest is not truth or reality as it is portrayed but language itself.

4.6. *Two Women* and *American Triptych*: Trevor Wishart

By comparison, Trevor Wishart's *Two Women* uses only the recorded sound from primary sources, albeit often heavily processed. We start at the train station, taking our cue from the announcement and gradually go into a kind of audio dream sequence or a long tunnel that delivers us up against the processed, but still instantly recognisable (to those of certain country, and time), tones of Margaret Thatcher. While the quote, 'Where there is discord may we bring harmony', is not entirely understandable, the word 'harmony' is emphasised, repeated and processed while mixed with what sounds like the stock exchange or race track. The next section opens with another instantly recognisable voice – of Princess Diana – it is processed, gaining trills and harmonies, and carries on a little too long so that the slightly pathetic, whining

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and confessional quality of the voice is emphasised. This is followed by Ian Paisley preaching about Thatcher over a repeated motivic call of 'Oh God', and his voice is changed to become full of demonic suggestion. The final part returns to Princess Diana and her desire to be 'queen of people's hearts'. This is elaborated by a blend of processes that renders her words full of sparkling, sonic, disembodied fairy magic. The work ends with the listener being delivered back down to earth back on to the station platform. These sonic portraits are designed to emphasise the iconic status of their subjects, an idea that Wishart repeated effectively in his 1999 *American Triptych*, which uses the voices of Martin Luther King, Neil Armstrong and Elvis Presley. In general, there is no dispersal of meaning, although if a listener chanced upon the work at various times during its duration they would not necessarily know the subject, although they would know that it was vocally derived. The pieces can be seen as a fantasy on the documentary material used, and all the processing serves to amplify the meaning as far as possible. Although the words are not performed as poetry might be, they have to some extent been re-performed in the Wishartian manipulation.

4.7. *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory*: Cathy Lane; and *Boomtown*: Nye Parry

Nye Parry's *Boomtown* and Cathy Lane's *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory* were commissioned[2] site-specific[3] works using material taken from public archives.[4] Both works set a number of voices from the past, as collected by the archives, within a musical structure and seek to build up a sense of meaning, history and place through sonic association, e.g. the siren in *Boomtown* and playground games and chants in *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory*; semantic extension and elaboration, e.g. the use of repetition of the phrase 'cutting them down' in *Boomtown* and structural association, e.g. the spatial motifs in *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory* which emphasise the gesture inherent in the words (see CD tracks). Both pieces use a montage of voices at various times, but generally the speech is as clear as it possibly can be (given the quality of the original archive recordings) in order to retain both the meaning and the idea of the authenticity of the speaker as a genuine voice from the past. *Boomtown* refers to a specific past event, namely the Peterloo Massacre, and the work draws on both historical reconstruction and abstract composition. *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory* is more general and is designed in some way to provoke the listener's own memories of growing up and childhood play.

These works may be seen as part of a subgenre called 'docu-music'.[5]

5. DOCU-MUSIC

Other works in the 'docu-music' genre could include Gavin Bryers' *Sinking of the Titanic*, Lisa Whistlecroft's work *For the Railways*, and Reich's *Different Trains.*[6] In all these works, as well as *Linked*, *Geekspeak*, *In Her own Time*, *Druro's Tree*, *Happily Ever After* and *The Memory Machine*, the main function of the spoken word material is as a signifier to historical authenticity, a voice of authority or *verité*. The voice must sound authentic in terms of the quality of the recording and the delivery of the words and indeed the accent of the speaker. It signifies a witness and it is a carrier of the past. In general, the archive material is kept relatively unprocessed, at least some of the time, so that the words can be understood and the meaning retained. Whilst works in this genre could perhaps benefit, and the genre could develop, by borrowing more techniques from practitioners of sound poetry, text sound composition and abstract sonic exploration of the speaking voice, the primary compositional intention is proscriptive and the techniques used emphasise the accumulation of meaning helped by programme notes filling in details of context. In 'sonic portraiture', context and setting is possibly less important and a more complete elaboration of the material can take place.

6. CONCLUSION

At the start of this paper I suggested that the use of spoken word material in sonic composition may amount to sub-categories or a genre. I would suggest that there is in fact a relatively large gulf between works in the three categories identified above, i.e. works where the spoken word is recorded or performed from a script or score, works using interviews, and works using archive and documentary material,

[2]I have mentioned the fact that they were commissioned as I believe it does impact on both the choice and use of the archive material – the works were both installed in sites where they would be heard by the local community.

[3]*Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory* was installed as a multichannel sound work in Clissold Park, London, as part of the Stoke Newington Festival. *Boomtown* by Nye Parry was commissioned by Oldham Borough for an exhibition celebrating the 150th anniversary of the borough.

[4]In the case of *Hidden Lives 2 – The House of Memory*, from the oral history collections of the Hackney Archives and the Hackney Museum, and *Boomtown* from the North West sound archive.

[5]This term was first used by Lane and Parry in a paper, 'Musical contexts for oral history, *Oral History Society Conference*, Bournemouth University, 2004.

[6]Although in *Come Out* (1968) Steve Reich uses a fragment of archival spoken word material, the dominant discourse of the work is debatably not about the contextualisation of that fragment, but subjects the speech to a dispersal of meaning through processing rather than enhancing the meaning of the speech, as in the other works cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771806000021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particularly between the first category and the other two. This gulf is, as I suspected, mainly to do with the compositional discourse and intent behind the work, and in fact may reflect the continuing split between the acousmatic tradition of electroacoustic music on the one hand and the practitioners of a wider definition of sonic art on the other, a division which has to do with the degree to which the composer wishes to engage with real-world sound and real-world associations. To this extent it is possible that the composer of work using archive and documentary material has much in common with soundscape composers and other sonic artists who have been unwilling to break their engagement with everyday life for political, social or aesthetic reasons.

> Through our active imaginative engagement with 'ordinary sounds' . . . we employ, and develop, the 'non-music' strategies that we ordinarily use, in addition to our more rarefied musical sensibilities. We expand our understanding of both familiar sounds and experiences, and of music itself. As listeners and composers, we may return to real life disturbed, excited sand challenged on a spiritual and social plane by music with hands on relevance to both our inner and outer lives. (Norman 1996: 2)

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