

Hearing Voices



Of Click and Glitch

Some notes on listening to Hearing Voices
a composed documentary for radio by John Wynne

John Levack Drever in Resonance Magazine volume 10 number 1

On the face of it *Hearing Voices* is an informative and evocative BBC commissioned radio documentary, based on endangered click languages from the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. It juxtaposes recordings of some of the languages in question (both spoken and sung), followed up with translation into English, environmental field recordings that help place the listener into the location, not forgetting the mandatory insertion of the voice of academic authority imputing the kind of information that convention demands on such an enterprise. But this work presents much more in form and content, and their interrelation, than the current received rules of radio documentary normally allow. From the outset the listener is presented with a capricious sound world where aural objects shift and surprise, and conventions are undermined or mutated. From a *northerner's* post colonial *point-of-audition*, where issues of representing the *subaltern* are riddled with dangers, many artists would grasp extant, albeit exhausted and ill-considered practices, or back out of the undertaking altogether. John Wynne, acutely sensitive to the hazards of the task in hand, and passionate about the subject matter, has found an approach that both informs, but also questions. And it is within that implicit questioning that is built into the structure and treatment of the materials that a running critique is revealed.

It goes without saying that the art of genre classification is a can of worms and can do more to limit a work's potential, than to present the listener with a set of tools to help tackle the unusual. With that in mind, my immediate attempts came short – linguistic study, sonic art, *ars acoustica*, text-sound, phonography, travelogue, digital music/glitch, ... perhaps radio ballade or akin to a Glenn Gould approach to radio documentary. To my knowledge the most close and most useful parallel in audio arts practice may be found with the use of sound in the GPO Film Unit's pioneering of 'documentary' in the 1930s, found in experimental films such as *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, *Spare Time*, and feeding into John Gray's feature of 1960, *West Highland*. *West Highland* draws its theme poetically from the endangered reign of steam on Britain's "most scenic

railway". Sonically this work brings together field recordings of the environment the train passes through together with local sounds. Often the sounds of the train have been transformed, emphasising timbral and rhythmic qualities. On occasion these sounds have been mimicked (thanks to the Radiophonic Workshop) and sonic relations are developed further. The 'local' sounds comprise of environmental recordings, aural history on the line and those places it passes through. Interleaved and subtly superimposed we hear poetry and song sourced to the passing environment and blending with the rhythmic and at times harmonic accompaniment of the engine – be that untouched, treated or simulated. More abruptly we hear technical details such as the speed of the engine, *etc.* declaimed at key moments. All these elements are carefully balanced and mixed, unfolding an acoustic structure that I could happily call *music*. Relying upon Grierson's notion of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality", there is no commentary in the conventional sense, and as a consequence I feel a lot more is said.

In *Hearing Voices* we enter a sound world of glitch, granular pulse and lo-bit rate buzz reminiscent of current digital (or so called *post-digital*) music aesthetics. This buzz has a hint of cicadas, however the glitch is more difficult to place initially. The dynamics change, and the buzz and glitch fade out whilst a texture of white noise grows. The perspective expands and the noise is defined as an approaching car punctuates the Kalahari Desert soundscape. It enters within earshot, passes and departs, presenting us with an immense acoustic panorama. The scene is set. The first voice we hear is that of the academic specialist – we are in danger of falling into commentary, but Wynne resists. After a few explanatory words on click languages we are offered our first glimpse. Ample space is given for translation (there are no superimposed translations to be found here), thus for the musically minded we zoom in on the qualities of this disembodied female voice. Wynne sets an acoustic bed for the voice to lie on, which we hear being derived from a vocal utterance, thanks to granular synthesis. The oral dexterity combined with sheer beauty is striking. The desire to play with the click recordings is great, and links with the glitch material that is encountered at the opening are explored. Once the connections are ossified with that of click, buzz and glitch through the unfolding narrative, the opening material (which returns throughout the work) is transformed into a kind of *primordial pool of vocal utterance* - this notion is reinforced by the academic telling us that it has been claimed that this is where language began. Again equality is reinforced as the academic voices undergo similar treatment that the click voice has been subjected to.

Throughout this work there is a process of re-balance being played out, with none of the elements dominating; furthermore it is this play that gives the work its innovative blend of form and content. The old staging issue does not miraculously disappear, but it is problematised. There is a sense that with all the spoken dialogue it is the microphone that is being addressed. We do not hear the questioner, his presence is only felt in the editing. The meeting of click languages with glitch and other digital granulation techniques is a fascinating yet suitably ironic one. Taken on a purely acoustic/psycho-acoustic basis (if that is possible) the tough lesson learnt is that despite the precise control over sound via current technologies, there is more nuance and variation made available for audition through spoken click languages, and it is these languages that we are rapidly losing.

