

Happily Listening

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Things we do and experience have resonance. It can die away quickly or last a long time; it can have a clear center frequency or a wide bandwidth; be loud, soft or ambiguous. The present is filled with past experience ringing in various ways and *now* is colored by this symphony of resonance. Particular resonant strands have shapes that are interesting to contemplate, and the tale I'm about to tell is about an experience I had which has a very clear ringing sound and almost no decay.

In the fall of 1987 I was invited to teach for a semester at the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia. It seemed like it would be an interesting change of pace and worth doing, even though it meant uprooting my family, subletting my house, finding a place to live in Los Angeles, furnishing it, and driving across the country with two small children in the back seat of the car (not an experience I recommend to anyone—its special resonance for me was a pinched nerve that lasted several years). Nevertheless, we got there, unpacked, and I reported for teaching. Among my responsibilities were four graduate student composers, among them, Randy Hostetler. I still remember my first lesson with Randy. It was in one of the big studios since he was working on a tape piece. When I arrived he was feverishly manipulating an Emu sampler, an 8-track tape machine, the mixing board and probably some other devices, which I've forgotten. What I heard, however, were the sounds of Randy's friends, teachers and family telling stories. He had recorded these over a period of a year or so and his only constraint on his subjects were that they begin their story with the phrase "Once upon a time...", and finish with "...happily ever after". The name of the piece was, appropriately, *Happily Ever After* [1]. At that moment, as I remember, he was involved in subtly tuning the inflections and intonations at the end of the piece. It wasn't quite clear to me what this was all about, but that didn't matter; the mix was absolutely fascinating. I then sat down to listen to his first draft of the piece.

Happily Ever After is forty-five minutes long. Only a handful of the stories are allowed to run to completion, most are interrupted by others and frequently interspersed here and there. Some are only distantly present. Occasionally, and with a wonderful arbitrariness, an isolated word or phrase is repeated or recycled. The pan position of each speaker is proportional to the time at which Randy recorded that particular person. The stories are varied. Some are funny, others serious, some are short, and others long. In some you can even hear the noises of a small crowd gathered around that particular recording session. Sometimes the speakers are isolated, other times they are mixed on top of one another. Towards the end Randy builds a very thick texture of voices, in development-like fashion. The result is a totally absorbing experience that swallows forty-five minutes in a single gulp.

I had nothing much to say to Randy except that I liked it--a lot--and that he should keep doing everything he was doing. As I quickly learned, 'composition lessons' with him were such in name only. He knew what he was doing, knew how to get it done, and I had as much to learn from him as he from me. The best thing I could do was to be supportive, supply some objectivity, and listen. I quickly learned that *Happily* was typical of the way he went about composing. His work was tightly tied to a musical worldview in which the stuff of everyday life was indistinguishable from his music. John Cage was his guiding spirit, of course. His friends and family were as much a part of the music he wanted to make as half-diminished 7th chords are for others. Randy died very suddenly on Feb. 1, 1996. All that those of us who knew him could do was shake our heads in disbelief. [2]

The primary conceptual model for *Happily* is, of course, storytelling, yet it is the work of a composer and it came to life in the realm of musical composition. Listening to a story and listening to a piece of music, however, have interesting similarities and differences. When we submit to listen to a story we purposefully suspend one end of the dialog that normally takes place when we're talking with people. The storyteller takes

control of our time and attention and we just listen. Storytelling captures an aspect of childhood experience when being told a story was a common ritual. It's a warm place for most of us and in some ways represents our first experience in really listening, perhaps even before music listening. When we agree to listen to music, on the other hand, we don't choose to refrain from talking back, this doesn't seem like an option. But in both cases, we do talk back, but not with our mouths. The conversation occurs in our mind's ear as we try to make sense of what is coming in and let it mingle with whatever else happens to be rattling around up there. Both music listening and story listening engage our presence as passive participants, but in both cases we react and participate in lively, but different ways. In *Happily*, however, we have a piece of music masquerading as storytelling, as well as storytelling presuming to be music, and as such this short-circuits the assumptions we bring to the experience, whichever way we slice it. But *Happily* doesn't actually assume the mantle of either story telling or music: it plainly asserts itself as something new. In some places Randy lets a story ride to completion, and sometimes it makes sense, but more often it's hard to tell what is going on, and this doesn't matter. At other moments he treats the voices much like musical instruments while still keeping their connections with their stories within arm's reach. At any rate, we're rarely given the comfort of data that would allow the piece to topple from the fence in one direction or another. It continually shifts from being story-like to being music-like, with lots of stuff ambiguously between the two poles.

There is an elliptical aspect to both music and story listening. As we listen to a story we apply templates to construct a personal model of the unfolding events and characters. They arrive at our ears as words and we each make them into flesh in our own way as we grasp at the unfolding narrative. The elliptical metaphor in storytelling is the space provided for us to compose our own inner 'film' as we listen. In music, however, the ellipsis is of a different sort. Music pretends to come fully stocked with all you need to survive, but in my view it provides a similar space for interaction, one in which your ears scan and parse the spectrum and in which you make decisions and connections within as well as without. Music furthermore provides a space in which you must decide how you're going to dance, which is my metaphor for your physical and emotional response to the sound. One does not normally dance to storytelling, or apply memory templates to music (although the latter is a familiar aspect of program music) but in *Happily* we do it all. As Randy's friends talk about their schoolyard experiences, their meals, their whale watches, their funerals, we recall our own similar experiences (or reasonable facsimiles), and as he cuts, bobs and weaves among these tales, sometimes making subtle moves with their rhythmic and temporal characteristics, sometimes letting them play out, and sometimes mixing them up in a jumble of voices, we have the urge to dance to the small and large rhythms. There is often a very straightforward musical sense to the piece. Speakers are treated like instruments, with solos, phrases, duets and ensembles, loud and soft sections, thick and thin sections, even some chords and tunes vaguely noticeable at some points through the combination of sets of words and voices. Continuity is alternately carried by the sense of a story or by musical juxtapositions and combinations. He encourages us to listen to the narratives as part of a musically orchestrated texture, and conversely to hear the big rhythms as if they were part of a larger story.

And, in fact, there really is a larger story that emerges at the end, and touches everyone who hears it. It's a portrait of a life in which barely a word is mentioned about that life, but in which every moment is colored by an obvious real personal relation between the author and his subjects. This is perhaps the ultimate elliptical aspect of the piece. We hear and learn, indirectly, about this young man with a degree of intimacy that I doubt he expected would emerge. While it's reasonable to think that we can learn a lot about any artist from his work there are few cases in which it is possible to draw such a vivid portrait of an everyday social, personal and family life. The qualities of the voices, their obvious delight in participating, the choices they make, the care they take, all provide stunning kinds of mirrors on the young man quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) holding the microphone. Having known Randy just confirms this but the piece gives every listener access to the same information. Were Randy to have taken a position more as archivist than composer, on the other hand, the results would not have been the same. As it is, however, we hear the cut, chopped and pasted stories as the work of his hand: he is conducting, his friends are responding warmly to his guidance, and we bask in the glow as we peer into the depths of his daily life.

As recorded music, *Happily* is rich with suggestiveness about the meaning and consequence of this technology. Recording as it is manifested here provides a window into a virtual space *Happily* has a kind of cinematic scope as it tours places and visits people. We shift from room to room, from person to person as Randy's ears and relationships with his storytellers convolve into the window-like loudspeakers we are using to listen with. But, there is a more significant art to his accomplishment. For the moment let us view recorded music as consisting of two approaches. In the first, recording creates the illusion of capturing an event that has an entirely plausible real-world history: recording as aural photography. Some people, at some place and time, sat down and made noise in front of some microphones, and we are hearing the captured sound. Whether or not this was actually the case is immaterial, it is the illusion that counts. The other approach is one in which it is clear that the recording is an artificial construction and that the sounds we are hearing have no plausible real-time history. While *Happily* flirts with both approaches, its domain is clearly the latter in that it compresses and convolves time and space through its technology, much as film does. Individual moments are frequently realistic enough to have been the products of a simple recording session, but the changes, pacing and mixes are not. The cumulative effect of the multiplicity of spaces and speakers is the creation of a much larger multi-dimensional 'virtual' space: the culture of Randy's daily life.

Anyone who has tried to create art that exists primarily in recorded form recognizes the potential for recorded images to dull with repeated listening--recordings age. The ability to revisit a recording as one would a favorite painting or poem is an important measure of its success in surviving as an artwork. While in live music some of the burden lies on the shoulders of the performer to engage and project, to continually make the music sound new, in recorded form the entire burden is on the ability of the sound to engage the listener in an active way. In my view, successful 'recorded sound-art' creates an elliptical space in which the listener will function as performer. To listen repeatedly to the same sounds and in each instance to hear them freshly means that the listener must be an active participant in the experience in a way that is quite different and distinct from listening to a live performance. Another way of saying this is that the listener now occupies the mediating role normally assumed by the performer. In recorded art then, the performance is composed into the process of unraveling the logic of the sounds as they pass by. In a way this means that the composer may be wise to forgo a level of explicitness normally found in performed music so that listening will consequently involve a kind of explication. *Happily* succeeds handsomely in resisting decay. Through the act of grasping at the multiple levels of elliptical concepts in *Happily* our active participation occurs on many different levels. Little is spelled out, stories are incomplete and confusing, rhythms and pitches are approximate and inexplicit, changes and continuity are surprising and enticing. The listener clearly has to participate and interpret or else all will blend into a soothing drone of voices. We not only have to negotiate the elliptical spaces normally provided by storytelling and music, but also those created by the multiplication of the two. At times it is quite easy to understand what is going on, at other times our attention is divided among several speakers and we have to lean forward and make a decision about which voice to follow, and at some points it is virtually impossible to understand anything, but we hear familiar phrases and quotes, and it keeps our ears pinned to the ongoing sounds. In other words, with each listening we have to make a conscious decision about how to listen, and each successive listening experience is probably going to be different and distinct. While the piece is not going to tell us how to listen, from the very outset the invitation to join in is clear, lively and inviting, and participation is enticing. The listener is invited in, asked to take a seat, offered a drink, and made comfortable settling into a conversation that will require attention, and a bit of work.

I've learned a lot from *Happily*, much more than Randy ever learned from me. Its resonance is one that has taught me a lot about listening and about the idea that an artwork needs to provide the user with room to breathe, to function individually, to respond in an idiosyncratic way. It highlights a sense of negotiation that we undertake as we agree to submit ourselves to an artistic experience. We're asked to pay attention, but implicit in the flow of the artwork's narrative are the terms of that attention. Looking around at the wide variety of kinds of music there are today, one notices that a specific character of difference lies in the ways that one applies attention. Listening to Schoenberg, Brian Eno, John Cage, Morton Feldman, are very different experiences because of the ways that these composers design your presence. I notice, for instance, that listening to Feldman,

for me, is an experience characterized by watching myself listen, while listening to Schoenberg means giving myself over to his demands. With Eno I notice the way the music colors my space, while with Cage I am totally confused. (These characterizations may seem orthogonal, but that's the point.) Listening to *Happily* is also characterized by a deep sense of self-examination as its very personal complexion forces us to confront the qualities of our own daily lives. The work is stunningly successful in two senses: first, of course, in the experience that it creates, and second in its suggestiveness. This suggestiveness is the bell that *Happily* rings for me. It sets off sympathetic resonance in many wonderful ways and places, the content of this essay being merely the most recent.

[1] Randy Hostetler, *Happily Ever After*, Frog Peak Records, FP008, available from www.frogpeak.org.

[2] I urge you to visit the web site set up around Randy and his work, www.livingroom.org. It is an excellent and wonderful place.