

Crawling With Tarts:
Grand Surface Noise Opera Nrs. 1 through 7
Program Notes (text-in-progress, 1.27.99)
Michael Gendreau

I. Two Brief Descriptive Texts

Like the *Operas* LP, surface noise and the non-aesthetic content of one-off transcription discs and institutional records are used the primary form generators for the two pieces. *Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 3 (Indian Ocean Ship)*, is scored for four turntables alone except for a plate bell, and *Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 4 (Drum Totem)* is for turntables and percussion. The recordings were made by Tom Erbe, whose previous engineering credits include James Tenny, Robert Ashley, Larry Polansky, and Alvin Curran.

This CD contains two large-scale operatic works for (mostly) turntables. Attention is focused on the quality of surface noise as a textural (binding) element, and for use as a formal signifier, the content of the discs. *Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 3 (Indian Ocean Ship)* (47:30) contains only the noise from (and subsequently, the sounds recorded upon) exquisitely worn discs, except for an occasional plate bell used to mark concealed transitions. The disc content in this opera is mostly amateur 78 rpm disc recordings, and a few institutional discs, spanning from 1942 to 1982. *Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 4 (Drum Totem)* (25:25) is for discs (surface noise) and percussion, and features the recorded debut of the 3-meter ham can cordophone. Disc content is primarily institutional and functional, spanning 1960 to 1977.

II. Notes Included in CD Booklet

The text included inside the booklet is as follows.

Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 3 (Indian Ocean Ship)

amateur disk recordings, plate bell

min: 1942; max: 1982; mean: 1960; σ_{n-1} : 13.7

Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr. 4 (Drum Totem)

institutional disks, drums, chalices, 3 meter ham can cordophone

min: 1960; max: 1977; mean: 1971; σ_{n-1} : 5.0

The second line of each is the instrumentation; of particular interest here is the type of discs used. This selection (like the selection of other instruments) defines the mood, and

other factors, of each piece. The third line of each contains the results of a statistical analysis of the historic span of each set of discs. This also is related to the mood, time in an historical sense, defined by a span of time, and by points within that span.

III. Interview Excerpts on the Aesthetics of the Surface Noise Opera

From *ND* Nr. 17 (written September 25, 1992):

Daniel Plunkett: What is the working relationship and process like when working on musical material?

Suzanne Dycus: Today we are working on a piece for the two of us to perform. Recently we have been developing “play along with music” using auto-manual 33-45-78 RPM record players to assist us. We have a collection of 78s which we began on our first trip to London when I found our first 78 player on Portobello Road in 1986. We carried it around with us for the rest of our trip; I went to Europe precisely for the reason of finding one, and a tea set. We play more than one 78 at a time, records having the same or different feeling, and add percussion and other sounds along with them to create the atmosphere. In the end, everything falls into place by the spontaneity of the event. To begin the present creation, we went to a 78 store and dug through boxes. Came home, played them for each other in various combinations. This discriminatory placement is the beginning. Next we will listen to what they say and play other instruments with them. This is how we will build our symphony. The things are there, they just need to be defined.

From an unpublished interview for *Grito* (written October 6, 1993):

Grito: What kind of materials and effects are used to compose your music?

Michael Gendreau: Anything; whatever is needed. Lately we have used turntables frequently, because we have found as source material many home-cut records (mostly made between 1940 and 1950). There are some amazing sounds to be found on these old disks, in the signal *and* the noise. It is important to note that nearly all of them were made for non-aesthetic purposes, i.e., simple communication, but they carry with them much more because of this: historical style, social conventions unintentionally communicated, etc.

From *Popwatch* Nr. 6. Here are four excerpts from a conversation between Michael Gendreau and **Suzanne Dycus-Gendreau**, recorded on September 9, 1994. The conversation is inspired by questions asked by Leslie Gaffney.

Excerpt One:

OK, so what are your ideals when creating the turntable pieces? Well...some of the sub-ideals?...**Those are all about narratives, those are all about building stories...Stories, that's excellent: that's why they are called "operas". Right. That's why the record pieces are *that way*.** So the ideal then is to communicate a linear story. **Yes.** A story with a theme and plot. **Right.** Well, I think that's true sometimes but other times I think we have nonlinear stories that are ...**branches...they deal with religion and politics and social...they are branches of whole...they are cohesive but they have offshoots so that you can go off in different directions...which makes it open-ended, it makes it so you have to...everyone gets something else out of it...they understand it differently.** Right. **That's what the *operas* remind me of.**

Excerpt Two:

This is one of the reasons we started working with turntables so that we could, the two of us, perform live more ideas, simultaneously, than two people normally can. Some of the recorded music *is* translatable to performance. Some of the recent pieces were made specifically for performance. Just about all of the operas were made that way, with a performance in mind...and then later, recorded. The performance and recording of these are similar. Things are balanced better on the recordings, but the live shows include audience interaction. **And they also...they're faster and more alive...more hooked into the nervous system, rather than into the creative...**The visual part was important...

Excerpt Three:

Oh this is an interesting question, well, because some of these things *did* come from our folks, in the sense that, we grew up hearing a lot of this music subliminally, and regarding some of these researches, it originally was not so much the idea of putting out music using these sources, but an exploration looking for...trying to understand some of this stuff that we had heard...recordings, but also advertising, things like that. My parents set me down in front of the television a lot when I was little, and I know I soaked up a lot of advertising...I've always been curious about what it was, of what it was made, and what effect it had. As to the rest of the question...those recordings come from everywhere, not just one caché. **I think our beginning started with the record player we first bought...a 78 player bought in England, and we had that one record...that's right...and then from there we started collecting 78s, and then through 78s we discovered the one-of-a-kind's...and through one-of-a-kind's we started...those being the amateur disc recordings...those started inspiring us to make the operas. The *Bee Opera* was the first opera in which we used the record player...and that's where we used the first form of the bee static...we actually used**

a turntable first on *Voccianna*...**that was the very first time we used a record player**...and it was used in *Sarajevo Center Metal Doors*; I can't remember if that was before the *Bee Opera*...Oh, but this is about the material, though, about what's *on* the disks. It ends up that these records contain a lot of interesting cultural artifacts. I guess about the most important thing about them is that they weren't made for aesthetic reasons. They were made for someone's personal documentation, or they were singing a song, or speaking a letter to somebody else...so they are personal and...completely divorced from the idea of *creation*, as an insulated, separate world (such the worlds of art or music). Their world was just their real lives...and that's one of the most attractive things about them and why we like to use them. That aspect...that's the content...but there is also the surface noise, which is really quite beautiful...it's not overdone, overstated...it's simple but complicated, simple in sound but complicated in information. **Right.**

Excerpt Four:

We have a cutting machine, a disc cutting machine, that we use. [Suz and Mic digress, inventing sections for *Particularly Noisy Opera*, to be written for an upcoming concert, using the cutting machine.] The reason it's particularly noisy is because the disc recorder has a very dull needle, so anything it cuts right now is particularly noisy.

From an interview with Scott Thiessen, which took place on June 25, 1995, for *Popnausea* Nr. 2:

Scott Thiessen: If there is talking in some of your pieces is that mostly sound oriented too or is actually what the words are?

Mic: Yea...I know this question and this is an important question. The question is...is the...is the textual component as important as the sonic element? Right? Is the literal meaning of the sample as important as the sound of the sample? And I think...Suz will give her own answer...but I think that we are using it as the sound rather than the literal meaning. 'Cause were not trying to recycle things, or to recontextualize old meanings.

Suz: Exactly.

Mic: I think we're really interested in...the sort of sonic communication itself, which is more complex and carries more information than verbal communication. You know like if we take some conversation, it's just the sound of the language rather than the words being spoken...to directly answer your question. And we've done things like taken whole...we have a piece, "Flat Leaves and Mandrills" which is about 25 minutes long or 20 minutes and throughout the whole piece it's based on a conversation...a taped conversation that Suz and I were having, or...no actually...it was Suz and Scott I think. Anyway it's wholly based a conversation. But the conversation isn't meant to be heard, in fact it usually isn't heard, but the forms and the rhythms of the speech and all that to a large extent determine the other sounds we added later. So it started out with that conversation at the base, but the literal

conversation was completely suppressed by the end of it. The rhythm of the conversation and the form of the conversation is retained...and that's interesting to us. You're highlighting a part of the conversation that's not usually heard or is not usually paid attention to...it's always heard I mean but it's not easily cognated. That's more interesting to us than to blatantly say a thing...[obscured]...more subtle. At least this is our intention.

IV. Excerpts from Letters and Other Relevant Notes

From a letter from M. Gendreau to Vittore Baroni (September 4, 1995):

“In honor of one of, in my opinion, our greatest musicians, who recently passed away, I want to send you this quote found in an article today. It is by Pierre Schaeffer, and I think it expresses more clearly than I myself could have, sentiments we have about the (re)use of old records in our operas. It is sad that his writings have not been very popular in the United States; I hope he was better respected elsewhere. ‘...there are no sounds (musical); noises (of happenings) or words (of a language) which are not (even though specialized) something else as well; i.e. clothed in a sonority which transcends their use.’”¹

From “Human Performance and Noise” by Dylan M. Jones and Donald E. Broadbent, contained in Cyril Harris: *Handbook of Acoustical Measurements and Noise Control* (third edition):

“The susceptibility of memory to the effects of irrelevant speech suggests that a whole range of tasks with which this type of memory has an intimate connection, such as reasoning, mental arithmetic, and problem solving, will also be vulnerable to disruption. Semantic processing (in this case, checking whether sentences make ‘common sense’) and syntactic reasoning (checking whether assertions such as ‘A follows B—BA’ are correct) are immune to disruption by continuous meaningless noise, but performance on both types of tasks declines if the subject is exposed to conglomerate noise containing irrelevant speech.”

From Ernest Robeson *Phonetic Music* p. 87

“...Context free English occurs in specialized languages of poetry, advertising, song lyrics, nonsense syllables, short phrases in speech research, short sequences in foreign language teaching, speech therapy, deaf pedagogy, and any isolated short sequence of language of four to five syllables...”

¹ From Pierre Schaeffer “Sound and Communication” in *Cultures: Music and Society* Volume 1 Nr 1 (1973)

Future Appendices

Record Lists
Scores

Items to Add to This Document

History of formal development
Simple description (or map) of form
Descriptions and titles of sections in each opera
Descriptions of elements within operas, as given in composition notes