

My
recent
multivoice
texts



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My recent multivoice texts / Lawrence Upton

1 Initial response, to Geoffrey Gatza & Kamen Nedev

Thanks to Geoffrey and to Kamen for their comments and questions:

"I really enjoy your use of different voices. Which leads me to ask, have you ever recorded any of these with different voices? Have you made chorus's for several voices ??? I am very fascinated by this method :-). Would it be too much to ask you to discuss this" - Geoffrey Gatza

"It's kind of weird, every time I read them I imagine a live performance, with sound in real time and space. Then again, these might work well in the context of a sound-collage, based on samples only. Something's making me think that the result would be drastically different in both cases" - Kamen Nedev

I have to say that I don't quite know what I am doing yet. I have probably said here before that it seems to me that working out what it is am doing ends it.

The newest work doesn't have a title yet. I recognise my hard copy folder, but it has nothing written on it. So, for the purpose of this note, I'll refer to it as The New Work; and maybe I should refer to the work of which it is a kind as Multivoice writing.

I'll talk about Multivoice and work up to The New Work as an example of it.

There are recordings of such work - I've been doing it on and off for nearly 30 years - but few or none in my possession. There were quite a few recordings at The Poetry Society in Earls Court Square in London; but a lot of the material there - books, tapes, etc - was just thrown in the rubbish bin when official verse took over again in the late 1970s.

I like multivoice work because it can enable so much as well as militate against the virtuosity extravaganzas that solo work may sometimes engender.

I had been performing from the late 1960s. Lots of gigs. During the mid 1970s I remade the way I wrote poetry... I'd done it before and I've done it since, I like to think; but this remaking took me away - sharply - from the kind of thing I had been doing, which I then rejected and threw away; and the offers of gigs stopped for some years until the new work established itself. The first occasion of that was when I was invited to perform at the London Sound Poetry Festival in June 1976, and I did multivoice...

My earliest multivoice texts were often just people saying things simultaneously; and it sounded like it. So I kept trying to do better. Apart from workshops, I think

A lot of *jpgjg* was group-made and would take the discussion away from multivoice of the kind you have asked about - one would speak of choreography, music, performance art... Often there was no verbal text as such -

at our farewell gig in March 1978, we each contributed a piece & Clive Fencott announced his contribution was **another istory of the middle east** and gave us copies of the Middle East Economic Review, saying "You'll find the words in there" -

but sets of ad hoc rules and cues between the enactment of which you joined in and made it up

But there was a thing the 3 of us did as the 3 of us, tho we later put it into a *jpgjg* programme in Holland.

I was in Stockholm (April 1977), making a quad tape piece, **The Last Man's Song** (again not at all like The New Work, but fragmented and electronically treated voices performing a graphical text). When I had made it and it was accepted into the programme, I was offered a live slot as well. Off the top of my head, I said I needed the presence of my collaborators, Fencott and Cheek, to do one of the pieces. To my amazement, their air fares were paid and we had to work out what the piece was.

In the event, it was a set, but the piece presented as justifying the air fares was this:

Salt carrier takes the house

Black vase on ebony

Glass container of blood or wine

Streams of seaweed delineate motion

A short lyric from an open-ended sequence called **Lyonnesse** - inundation of a whole land, search for the grail etc

You might read it in a couple of seconds and turn the page; and I took the opportunity to slow it up and explore it, an elaborate kind of onomatopoeia.

So it started sharply, a second voice comes in, starting again, a split second after the first, the first still working its way towards the end of the first line; a third voice comes in... The first voice works its way all the way through to the end, still sharp and quite staccato, goes back to the beginning and repeats more softly. The second and third voices fall away from the straight narrative at the performers' will, as does, eventually, the first voice. So you get the initial inundation, and then turbulence as only fragments of the text are read... Increasingly the fragments come from the latter half of the poem and eventually it fades out in a quiet rocking on "motion"

As well as performing in the live version, I also made two tape versions, using minimal treatment of the 3 voices & those (Salt Carrier 1, Salt Carrier 2) + The Last Man's Song were in the library of the Fylking in Stockholm. I have copies, I believe, in boxes which were put into my attic in 1985 when I moved here. I don't know what state they are in. They've never been published.

After all that, I did all sorts of things including a long linear poem called Mapping My Brow and wall of sound electro-acoustic tape work, but no Multivoice in the sense I am using the term here.

I started again out of 2 threads of activity. One was to have texts to perform with the late Lilian Ward - so the drive was occasional rather than formal - and the other arose from the needs of the poem I was making.

I'll talk about the latter. It was in the writing of a long sequence called Tongues, which is now o.p.

I was (early 1980s) taking the (variable length) line as the unit and measure of composition, but I was aiming at shifts in voice within the line.

One could reverse and double up meaning by shifting from voice to voice. (I'd say this comes out of my take on Sound Poetry, but the energy for it was my take on Langpo.)

In the texts as published, I presented the whole line only. I did score it for multivoice but never made the implied recordings. It would have been a large undertaking because each fragment of speech, perhaps one or 2 words, had to be buried in a carrier sentence and then extracted from the recording

e.g. you will probably say "as a cloud" differently as a unit to the way you will say it in "I wandered lonely as a cloud".

The aim was to give each element of the poem a carrier sentence as indicative of its stress and tone vectors. They'd say the sentence, perhaps several times; and then I'd take the bit I wanted

I didn't then have access to a studio and the editing would have been editing block and razor blade stuff. So it never got done. (Around then I went from a household of 1 to a household of 5 if you count the cat; and the cat, I assure you, counted the cat, quite unavoidably)

So the texts of Tongues were published without indications of how I heard them. That was ok, I think. Other interpretations are fine and I had aimed to make it comprehensible as it stood.

Most of it has been performed. People may have recorded it.

I took the technique further, in a series called **Outputs**; and I soon had poems where the voice was changing from syllable to syllable sometimes.

That had metrical implications. I began scoring them with character names and stage directions to make them comprehensible.

Both **Tongues** and **Outputs** were published in ephemeral media, poorly distributed. A long term aim is to make them available again.

Another long break 1986+ as I explored an entirely different kind of writing in **Messages to silence**.

I've returned to the scored **Multivoice** on and off...

A bit of the words is actually a reworking of a text from an entirely different series which originally had the working title **bombing**, which surely does not need explanation, and was then retitled **Volvox**. I took that from the science fiction of Greg Bear - a process where all the voters, including those in customised bodies and in online data store debate mentally online i.e. high speed chatter in unimaginable multitudes

Volvox was a rerun of **Tongues** in many ways; and it failed over all, probably because I told it what to say instead of listening to it. I shall probably continue to cannibalise **Volvox**

My preference would be to publish many of **The New Work** texts as linear poems with the word "Multivoice" on the top as indicative & that'd be good if I had my own company of performers and an eager but patient audience.

In reality, it's asking too much ; so I have chosen to present most in script form

The New Work is not as disjunctive as **Outputs**; and there are in any case other modes of disjunction to explore; and the response to that exploration on this list has been encouraging.

Until recently, I have been writing the text and then scripting it - I mean the allocation of identities such as "Voice 1" to individual lines - afterwards, though a large part of that process had been done in my head at the time of writing

The process of scripting offers possibilities which are not always apparent at the time of writing the original text. One discovers implicit possibilities.

I have begun to script as I go, so that those possibilities affect the course of the writing.

I want, at some time, to try realising these texts both live and in a studio. I am sure that the two approaches would be quite different in their results; and the realisation would also affect the way that I made new pieces.

*rewritten slightly from a posting to **Wryting** Thursday, 16 May 2002*

2 Response to Peter Fogarty # 1

thank you for this, Lawrence. I have always wondered how to create the sense of a layered text, one where the words overlap one another - I tried to form a sense of this through .pdf texts such as <http://www.mutate.co.nz/layer.pdf> but I regard these as failed texts because they are unreadable, unperformable,

Well, now, I wonder if that's true. I am grateful to you for the url. I found that exciting.

If you were to put the different layers side by side as in the parts of a piece of music, you would have an entirely readable and performable text. Surely what you have in your pdf is a visual analogue of the expected resultant sound rather than the score to produce that sound

Perhaps your feeling that the text fails is because you are asking it to function both as a visual and a score, but the musical equivalent of a painting is the sound we hear, not the score

When I looked at your pdf I thought of Jim Rosenberg. Do you know his work? He uses hypercard stacks to create layers. He says: "The painters put pigments atop one another, the composers play sounds at the same time, why shouldn't poets put words in the same space as well?" (Rosenberg in WORD SCORE UTTERANCE CHOREOGRAPHY, edited by Cobbing / Upton, Writers Forum 1998)

but I wonder, with your multivoice texts, how do you show that the people speaking are speaking simultaneously, when you can not physically show this on the page

Here's the beginning of one, March # 3, I haven't posted yet - I've only just got it to work as I think I want:

Voice 1:

Tea and biscuits with a complete idiot!

Voice 2 & Voice 1 simultaneously:

Voice 2: I fully understood. You didn't understand.

Voice 1: You didn't understand.

Voice 3:

I start defining myself, screaming, defining what I am supposed to get drawn into

Generally, in this sequence, I have been concentrating on the changes of direction within the line, but my interest in the simultaneous multivoice is still there and it came out here - with the echo and the contradiction. Clearly, if they are speaking simultaneously then Voice 2 goes on after Voice 1 has stopped. What is left open

to interpretation is to what extent the "You didn't understand" of voice 1 is a continuation of the first line; but I am happy for that to be ambiguous. With the exclamation at the end of the first line there has to be a pause both physiologically and semantically

Having to think about the text a little bit may draw you in to it. (A friend who likes a lot of my poetry saw a visual poem of mine for the first time recently - **house**, published as a chapbook from housepress some years ago. Like your pdf, it is a little unreadable due to overlay. She looked at it for some time and said - I can't quote accurately - she enjoyed working with the text, trying to read it, trying to think what it might sound like) and I understood her i.e. that for her the difficulty of the text was part of the way the text worked. I don't think that was the difficulty itself that she liked, but the fun of working with ambiguity. I want more readers like that!

I remember the playwright Churchill [who wrote *Top Girls*: forgot her first name] did this through a narrative device of splitting her dialogue so that the first person speaking has their line interrupted by someone else, but the line continues after the interruption, and it is given to the reader to understand that the first person had not stopped speaking . . . is this how you see it, Lawrence?

In many of these pieces, I am hoping to generate any number of threads not just continuing despite the interruptions but generated by them too

Obviously, the scoring technique I have just demonstrated is very limited... This is an example of how the decision to score as one writes would affect how one works, I guess. Writing a text linearly first is unlikely to throw up the need for complex simultaneity.

At the beginning of the 90s, when I went back to the *Writers Forum* workshop for the first time in years, I recall taking some rather precise verbal scores and I could not get anywhere with them because no one would engage with them on my terms - they treated them as texts to be interpreted. What they did was very interesting but the effects I had planned never got near to realisation!

So I shelved that. Since then, if I want to represent simultaneity I just write or print or paint one thing over another, like you; but that's done for visual effect and in the belief that no one is going to want to try to perform the work

Alaric Sumner and I were preparing to form a group with A N Other to perform such texts when he died in 2000...

I took his place in **Nekvia**, which he wrote with the composer Joseph Hyde - singer, speaker, audio and video. Joseph's score adapts music paper / notation. Basically it marks time off in 5 second slots. He's there doing the prerecorded audio and video, and the speaker and the singer. And all 3 of you have stop watches!

Though I already had the concept, I drove the 2 musicians up the wall the first time we rehearsed, much as my colleagues had frustrated me a decade before I guess. I just wasn't used to working their way. But we got there. And it's quite doable.

If I wanted to work with very complex simultaneities, I'd steal that idea... I used to generate enormous piles of paper, incomprehensible to anyone else, when I was doing tape work in the 70s; and I think that was because I just hadn't bothered to study scores, just listened to the results and assumed I knew it all

Given the difficulty of doing such things live, my inclination would be to go straight to tape realisation - and in fact I've been thinking of making some new tape pieces - I call them "tape" pieces because I am old, though I've still got my 20 year old Revox open reel machines... and my editing block

That'd free me of the need to make unambiguous scores & anyway any play script or music score gets qualified as you start to work on it so until it's been rehearsed it's sensible to regard it as provisional

If you look at early Cobbing you'll find him distinguishing between linear and visual versions of poems tho he largely dropped that once he'd marked out his territory, but he did so having established the possibility of making the distinction

*revised from a posting to **Wryting** Friday, 17 May 2002*

3 Response to Peter Fogarty # 2

Hi Peter

Thanks for that

I like your idea

Yes, I always wanted to do an exhibition of pieces such as the layer.pdf text, using either a transparency hanging from the ceiling and the pdf projected onto the transparency with a mouse available somewhere for people to click on and trigger the scrolling/redraw effect which is what I love about the .pdf format. One can look closer and closer at a particular area of text, trying to read the different layers as they appear, and then move on to other areas, compiling a sense of the whole piece in their minds.

I like it for the "either" without an "or", even if it is - probably - an accident. It opens all sorts of possibilities!

But I also have in mind a simple page size transparency hanging from the ceiling - is that what you meant? - in the midst of a high tech projection. I like that mixture.

The moment's probably passed, but Cobbing and I wanted to exhibit our poem **Domestic Ambient Noise** (300 booklets) in a gallery but with the booklets hanging from strings...

but to really deserve immortality, the poem must contain a world, a world that is accessible to the person with the right keys,

Don't know about that... Deserving immortality? 2 things occur to me. One is Henry Miller saying that if he died and found god existed he'd spit in his face; and the other is Lewis LaCock who has, in the last few hours, said on *webartery* that he's all for beauty but he does at times have an aesthetic that's a bit different than many!

Artistic immortality, along with artistic fame, is usually a curatorial product; and in much the same way that his / her bodily waste is a curatorial product. We've got pots they kept the breakfast cereal in from 4000 years ago; but the library of Alexandria has gone, courtesy of the behaviour of Stormingus Normanus.

Just interpreting my own sensory data is enough for me. Trying to respond to other human beings without uttering non sequiturs in bewildered irrelevance is a long term aim.

*posted **Wryting** Friday, 17 May 2002*

4 **Response to Peter Fogarty** # 3

beauty, like god, is personal, and aesthetics are always personal unless you want to broaden the definition to something that is shared by a group.

I think that what we are all / each doing here assumes that we are talking about something that is shared

but yeah, by deserving immortality I mean that it will be remembered. If not by me, then by someone else. If I forget it, then it couldn't have been so memorable?

Yes, quite possibly. Look at how women have been edited out of the arts record

& Thomas Traherne... rediscovered by chance

dazzling sculptures dug up - I'm thinking specifically and idiosyncratically of many fine pieces found in recent years in Xania in Crete by builders putting in new sewers

Think how underrated Bach was

There are so many reasons why things are either forgotten or not even known about in the first place

I wouldn't worry too much about immortality - & I wasn't that serious about Miller... I am from a facetious culture, you know... just meant concentrate on the moment as much as possible

How can you explain sunlight to the blind? Sound to the deaf? How about that moment where all you see is shadow and lightness, then they shift and move and define themselves, and you place yourself in your world.

... Please wait...

A bit of the words / Lawrence Upton

Voice 1:

Over muddy grass to the editorial offices... Here are themselves.

Voice 2:

Ceremonies, migrations, originating, ending.

Voice 1:

In the winter, I -

Voice 3:

A prelude, to do business.

Voice 1:

An uncomfortable time.

Voice 3:

Only, one sounds different.

Voice 2:

An alternative, flickering, trading.

Voice 4:

Children chanting behind -

Voice 5:

Waves.

[Pause]

Voice 1:

Dictators come out with the story.

Voice 3:

Dear I.

Voice 1:

A hierarchy of them falls into the clearing.

Voice 3:

From the emptied editorial offices?

Voice 1:
Theoretical trappings!

Voice 2:
Reference in tragedies all over the heartland.

Voice 1:
In which nothing, strictly nothing -

Voice 2:
Even today -

Voice 1:
Would seem, to child murderers -

Voice 3:
World culled -

Voice 4:
A virus -

Voice 5:
Shining on down -

Voice 4:
Met an updating -

Voice 5:
From cartoons.

Voice 4:
A bout, but -

Voice 3:
With the woods?

Voice 1:
The treasure.

Voice 3:
They open toward the answer.

[Pause]

Voice 4:
Fuck, she has.

Voice 5:
Been shown?

Voice 3:
Is fragile inside th -e

Voice 1:
And it materialises?

Voice 2:
Skin a kind of all this.

Voice 3:
I wondered if -

Voice 4:
Subjects evolving.

Voice 1:
Laughter echoes his fists come towards me.

Voice 3:
Cinema an alternative to the editorial offices.

Voice 1:
Gold something which is a world seen.

Voice 5:
Still sung.

Voice 1:
Artificiality.

Voice 3:
Kinetic.

Voice 1:
Involvement.

Voice 4:
Asked itself: Shall I avoid pain?

Voice 5:
Found dead.

Voice 1:
Covering of sadness.

Voice 3:
In front of him.

Voice 1:

He recognised a bit of the words.

March # 3 / Lawrence Upton

Voice 1:

Tea and biscuits with a complete idiot!

Voice 2 & Voice 1 simultaneously:

Voice 2: I fully understood. You didn't understand.

Voice 1: You didn't understand.

Voice 3:

I start defining myself, screaming, defining what I am supposed to get drawn into.

Voice 1:

Distracted. Therefore, derision. An incapacity to perceive respect and concern.

Voice 2:

Respect and concern is the primary colonisation.

Voice 1:

I shall kill you; it can only be deferred.

Voice 4:

Waning interest -

Voice 1:

Sad vessel, misunderstanding -

Voice 2:

Brisk sovereignty

Voice 3:

Possible uncertainty concertina, before interiority.

Voice 5:

As to narratives, an astonishingly muddled list of events would take her fancy.

Voice 1:

But my delicacy towards your bullet dissolves. My perfect moon.

Voice 5:

Section Two. Fact disappearing in a brief slightly humorous raid. Best wishes and resist the police. Flawed in speech. Flawed world. Burnt flesh. Fields of stone.

Voice 4:

Gulf War Sexuality in the laurels of the day.

Voice 2:

Easily here! spring organs of their human bodies, not leaving out such a sky.

Voice 1:

You are easily traced.

Voice 2 & Voice 1 simultaneously:

Voice 2: You?

Voice 1: I feel nothing. I don't want to.

Voice 2:

Or I can be irritating.

Voice 1:

But anywhere else, in the hands of the language, how it attempts to get drawn into protected persons, in tears, to stop the ache. .

Voice 2:

Said to be.

Voice 1:

My delicacy towards your bad manners is the parasite exit.

Voice 4:

Gentile disbursement extra. Licence -

Voice 5:

Roundness? what she says is this...

Voice 1:

Soon. Crack. A sky stitched up by geography.

Voice 5:

In the challenge around gender.

Voice 3:

Provided with maidens?

Voice 5:

Tracing nudes.

Voice 1:

Roles are, no sauce. That loss of ache of loss. Cleave. Retribution for a globe in scaffolds.

Voice 5:

Sobriety velvet, flattering world opinion. Her fancy... I begin again, evoking doors. A phone -

Voice 1:

Pragmatists like the hands of annihilation. Either I can tell... In the

Voice 2:

Doll. Dump that heaving smile. I can tell.

Voice 3:

Thinking of you. Break. Therefore, in opposition to following wind, I think.

Voice 1:

I think language is not reciprocated.

Voice 2:

Spring. Bodiless on my screen. I feel nothing. I will kill. Nothing..

Voice 1:

But my delicacy towards your bad manners is what little freedom we do like.

Voice 4:

All the doors phone. Light dissolves me. I think, all around myself. I will kill. I will have justice. That pain of sunshine.

Voice 5:

I was wondering if I can pressure, a figurative justification for extremely obvious mistakes. Sugars ahead.

Voice 1:

I shall kill.

Voice 4:

In respect of a war this won't be construed as sunshine. We in flawed speech. Such a globe in flawed speech. I shall live a while longer. Forget this. Expunge the obvious phenomenon. Be content!

Voice 3:

Violent torn hands. Verb forms.

Voice 1:

Quick tide urge barricade.

Voice 5:

Deleted narratives -

Voice 3:

Some are clearly expressive, as a figurative justification for wonderful reading.

Voice 5:

splinter.

Voice 4:

Wondering, one losing his moods. Out of the forms. A missile of communication. That twinge of derision. Crack. Your ghost dissolves my behaviour, thinking of you. A command of the doors. And such a relief. And memory, to maintain death, is English, offensively.

Voice 1:

Resistance to calamity; I shall live.

Voice 2:

Bodiless remains.

Voice 1:
I could break your... bones.

Voice 2:
The memorialising of obvious phenomena, really may turn out to be complaisant.

Voice 1:
One losing his moods.

Voice 4:
This has been obvious mistakes. Foretelling and prior imaging. I shall kill them all...

Voice 3:
Followed stream... ash...

Voice 5:
Loss slang.

Voice 4:
Sack a sky! Current terror as a smile. An assassination attempt on my resistance to rob them.

