**Hark – Listening Research.**

*Ethnographies of Listening:*

*A Vignette: “In Earth” by Errollyn Wallen.*

Introduction.

This is a case-study/vignette of the material for generating a dialogic participative ethnography. It is made available to the participants, the ‘voices’, the listeners, for validation and to illicit any further responses after a second listening to the piece. In presenting this material there is a minimum of analysis, but an inductively derived attempt to perceive, generate, some patterns of modes of engagement by grouping responses under 10 Modes/Headings.

1: Seeking a Sense of Orientation

2: Images & Word Pictures

3: The Story: Holistic view: Naming

4. Structures

5. Emotional/Physical responses/Atmospheres

6. Reflections on Attention/Engagement/Focus

7. Connections with others’ responses

8. Recognitions/Epiphanies

9. Aspects of performance

10 Compositional Intent.

I have elsewhere – in the paper *Ways of Listening* – speculated, a priori, and from a reading of the interdisciplinary literature, that there might be: modes of engagement with music – certain kinds of attention to certain musical features; certain preferred, dominant modes, styles or starting points; and a possible repertoire of listening modes which I have referred to collectively as ‘auditory imaginative play’. The inductively derived Modes/Headings here, as they are validated by participants, may provide further material for development of such a general heuristic, and assist our theorising about listening to music.

This text also serves the purpose of showing listeners that their voices create a response-world unique to their participation and their relationship to this piece of music. In *Ways of Listening* I asserted that ‘the audience is mute’ to draw attention to the absence, in conventional Programme Notes and Performance Reviews, of an evocation of the visceral and resonant, embodied experience of listening to music. This text therefore provides an example of the kind of material that could become a Performance Ethnography realised in a live performance with the music. This possibility is part of discussions with the composer Errollyn Wallen.

I grouping the responses under these modes/headings I am not drawing fixed boundaries. Indeed listeners often start from a particular mode – an immediate emotion, an image, a word-picture, or from some musical knowledge of structure – and then move to another. In other compositional processes listeners build up their holistic sense of the piece by moving through, cumulatively a series of modes, for example, from an image – to a word-picture – noting an ‘epiphany’ of recognition, towards a cumulative sense of the trajectory of the piece and their experience of it. At other times the effects of group co-presence can be seen in the way that agreements, disagreements, and associations sparked by others’ contributions create exchanges.

Essentially this listening into text process is about ways of noticing how our knowledge is and becomes embodied through music.

**1: Seeking Sense of Orientation**

Margaret: And then I thought, ‘Is it oriental?’

Tony: I thought the first couple of minutes weren’t really music at all. It was a lot of very interesting sounds and very cinematic…

**A sense of place and atmosphere**:

Jean: And then it developed a dreamlike quality and I was thinking that, that’s two very odd things to put together – spooky and dreamlike – but I really felt that they, they were both there. And then it seemed to me to be a preparation for a tribal funeral, which in a way it was. I mean I was thinking of a very primitive tribal funeral.

Bernie: Yes. I was thinking the word ‘Aboriginal’ several times when I was listening to it.

Jean: I was in Africa.

**Just staying with the unknown/strangeness of the music:**

Anne: I, I often get distracted, listening brings emotions and memories. And I, then I get lost in the memory and lose the music for a while. But I did try not to do that and I tried– and I found especially the first part of that very easy to stay in the moment. I was enjoying the moment of the music and all the different things coming in. And I just enjoyed every, every moment of it. And I never left the music because there was always something of interest and, to hold me, hold me there. Even when I didn’t really know what– at the beginning when it was all new and didn’t have any memories of having heard it before or anything like it before. I could just enjoy the moment, every moment of it.

Here we see the contrasting ways in which listeners allow themselves, as it were, to ‘be held by the music’, allowing dream-like qualities to predominate or to find descriptive words immediately arising – cinematic, tribal, primitive, oriental, Aboriginal.

**2: Images & Word Pictures**

Elaine:

When I see the first bit, I kept thinking it needed a scary picture to see… It was like background to some kind of frightening ghost story or scary kind of thing.

Janet: Yes, I felt really uneasy at the beginning. Some of the sounds were almost science fiction.

Margaret: Like *Alien*? From the film *Alien* or something..

Jay: See I didn’t feel… I didn’t find anything Asian in it to emerge into western, but it sounded… The, the beginning sounded to me sort of, well, cinematic and kind of wilfully eerie and sort of a prepared piano played through a, a whale……yeah, it was, it was a whale, whale sounding underneath and so you had this underwater resonance sort of thing going, but also, you know, it didn’t sound like something that was coming from a creaking ship.

Joyce: I was in a very industrial, post industrial place that, you know, with empty bit of an industrial landscape that was now abandoned. And I felt walking, walking through it so as you say voices are outside. And then it’s almost like the sirens inviting you to, to come with them, or to enter another place.

**How the image/picture combines with a sense of structure, atmosphere, recognition: cumulative sense from a series of modes of engagement**…

Dorothy: Well I thought of it… The sound coming behind me was quite powerful, because it seemed to fill the whole space and I was taken to… It was, it was in the centre of Australia and it was hot, dusty, ochre-coloured, watching the animals, but also the, the indigenous people. And then I thought, ‘This is not something I would listen to.’ But then when the strings came in that kind of… So there was a grinding, which was the primitive stuff to begin with, but when the strings came in it was a connection, there was a connection there, I thought I can relate to this. And that obviously built and built and built, so that kind of strengthened the connection and then I was absolutely gobsmacked when the tune came that I, I recognised. And I thought, ‘Oh, wow! That’s fantastic.’ And I was totally into it then. And I thought this is a magnificent piece of music. This is just great. And then just, from then on it just, I was totally in tune with it. Because I love that piece of music and I thought how clever, what a clever juxtaposition of the quite primeval sounds to begin with. And I, and I love composers who can do things with traditional tunes that we know and love that are quite classical and I love people being able to do different things with them. But that, I thought that was…at the end of that I really thought that was quite special.

Merri:

I was struck again, to begin with, by the earthy, natural rhythms, giving me a kind of grounding reassurance.  I was impressed by the organic roundness and wholeness of the music, again feeling it was akin to being in a rainforest with a range of pitches and timbres coming together with an incredible integrity, completely encompassing discords and at the same time having an airy spaciousness that I found reassuring, like I'm being surrounded and cradled, encompassed in nature and yet with space all around me.

Leslie: In the first place I had a vision of large ships moving in the night, chains and anchors rattling and the ships bumping into each other and certainly a bit of chaos and suffering, out of which something beautiful emerged.

**3: The Story: Holistic view: Naming**

Jay:

And as it got… and then it started to get a little bit more violent in a way that rather, you know, I, I don’t know, it seemed slightly violent or harsher and then when it resolved into the voice, well resolved first into the strings and then the voice, I thought it brought it all together and I thought it, it became kind of wonderful rather than just interesting. Because I wasn’t expecting that at all and I didn’t know the piece…

**The way in which the various modes elide and become cumulative in making a holistic sense of the piece**:

Sheilagh: I, I mean I resonate with a number of things that have been said, and at the beginning I thought, ‘Where’s the music in this?’ But I began to get a, a feeling and then a picture – and I don’t often see pictures when I listen to music – but it… Water, deep chaos and the sort of, I got a strong sense of something emerging, of birthing, and it was that…this, this beginning of a tune… That it was a marimba or something first of all and then the, the strings and it came and it went and it was haunting, because I felt I knew it, and it wasn’t actually until just before the voice came in and I thought, ‘I definitely know this.’ And, and then the voice came in and I thought, ‘We’ve arrived.’ And the, the melody and, and the music and then of course the, the voices about death and I thought, ‘Help. I’m not ready for that yet.’ [laughing] You know, I’m just, I’ve just felt something come to fruition and all of a sudden it’s been put in the earth. But it was that transition, I mean the whales, you said, and, and, I, I, I got that sense of deep water to start with. And, and something ordered coming out and, and harmonious coming out of it.

Bernie: I thought it was, I thought it was really…let me tell you what, what it, it did to me, it made me imagine, initially, a sort of primal scene and what I got from it, and I wasn’t looking for this, was like the evolution of life. Now that sounds a bit pompous, but I was hearing all this earthy, volcanic boom, boom, boom, boom… if I had to give it a name Well I can give you an answer to that, because I was not trying to be clever and think of something as…but it just it me, it was *Evolution*. …you know the geological, you know earth, tectonic plates, that’s what I got through, Aboriginal,

Elizabeth: The dust, that’s what I want, something like that.

Jill: For me the whole thing was waking up to death because at the start I felt that we were in a big cavernous place and every now and again there was this sound, it sounded almost like Big Ben, that you could hear from a distance and that was outside the, the cavernous where there were sounds that were deep and electronic in a way and... And then there were, there was another sound from outside that, that was a sound of prag– not so much fear but of, well, yes it was a bi– it was a sound of somebody in pain, coming... You could hear it from outside and then gradually the outside took over from what was inside, so, as a listener you very slowly moved outside the cavern – or I did and in moving out it’s more and more the strings came. First of all within the cavern and as you further moved out you, you had– I’m not explaining this very well. You had that feeling that the s– that the strings was soothing, taking you out. But they were taking you outside to your death. And that was when *Remember Me* came in, which is a beautiful aria anyway and... In the end, at the end of that, that’s what it was, one died. But not in fear. It just was the end.

I wouldn’t, I haven’t got a title for it.

Colin: Yeah, I don’t know the name of it. I’m not familiar with it. If I was to give it a name it would probably be “From something to something”. So I thought there was a journey, maybe from chaos to hope because it seemed very chaotic at the beginning, very primal, elemental. I had, sort of, i– images of *Asguardians* fighting the Ice-giants, you know, there’s just something kind of big and powerful and... There’s a degree of violence or conflict, or some kind of discord and then the kind of wailing, which was clearly distress. So, you know, it was a, it was almost like giving birth, it was, there were pains but somehow the melody may have been brought in a kind of narrative which came, as I say, it’s not from chaos to order, I’ve given the wrong word I think, from chaos to hope because there seemed to be something quite humane that was answering the wailing and, and then obviously when the voice came in it gave a little bit more sense. And I think in a way I’ve already worked-out, pure guessing now I really don’t know whether it’s to do with the holocaust, the 9/11, or some kind of commemoration of some pretty awful event. But it could just be a, equally a just metaphorical for the whole creation, or for giving birth of... Or something like that.

**4. Structures**

Peter: I, I, I felt that it was rather like an emergence of old western music out of more eastern music. There was a sort of… There was a sort of assemblage, almost a collage of different types of music, different sources of music out of which the viol consort which luckily I recognised was probably personal [laughing] and sort of emerged out of it. My own, my own…I, I, I rather liked the way that happened…

Tony: I say not music, because there was no, there was no rhythm. I couldn’t discern any beat. It was just a lot of interesting sounds and quite eerie and so when the violent music started I liked that, I think because it was a bit of a relief almost.

Bernie: Yes. And then I got the sort of… And then I hit upon the cellos of, of they came in and then I hinted upon sort of structure that I related to as opposed to rumblings of the planet and I, I just sort of saw dinosaurs and primal…and the, what I imagined was sort of organisation coming out of this chaos and then it surprised me when I heard the singer come in. And what I thought was is now I’m just not, I not the only observer. Up till then I was the only observer taking that and then I was listening to somebody else observing that, because a voice came into it, which I wasn’t expecting.

**Structural leads to emotional**: Marjory: Emptiness.......waiting for something to happen, then a wail....harmonious strings interrupted by alien noises, then briefly a lovely electric guitar as a contrast. This merges into “When I am Laid in Earth” sung with such feeling that I have a knot in my stomach and stinging eyes. I LOVED THIS PIECE: it made me wait... and then rewarded me.

Merri: I hear the chord progressions of the lament forming much earlier than I noticed them before, intertwined with sounds of spaciousness and hollowness, even more beautiful than before, if that were possible.

**5. Emotional/physical responses/Atmospheres.**

Elaine: It was primeval for me at first. Almost tribal..

Jay:

It sounded like a piano to me. I, I mean like a, like banging on a piano on the inside. And then it did get… And when I say wilfully eerie, I don’t actually mean that in a bad way, I, I liked it and I liked it that way.

**Shared responses**:

Elizabeth: Very interesting. The first bit, those low bass notes, they were almost a physical sensation in your chest.

Anne: I was going to say exactly the s– I felt that at the beginning I was part of it.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Dorothy: Because I could feel the thing. I could feel all the vibrations and

things inside me.

**Reactions, short and spontaneous**:

Bernie: I fell in love with it

Leslie: I loved it.

Jean: My first thought was it was just plain spooky.

Anthony: I hated it. Seriously, I started off by thinking, ‘Oh this is marvellous, this is atmospheric.’ And then it went on and on and on with a series of peculiar

Joyce: What I’m saying these big strong beginning that really got int– inside you. I really felt them.Well, I felt them, reverberating noises which you kept on, I kept on trying to make sense of and couldn’t.

**The cumulative modes, starting with emotion and moving through the others:**

Merry: Me too. I’ve never heard anything so beautiful. I didn’t recognise it at first until, until the singing came in and I was, I was completely transported. And I thought it was all beautiful but the first part I, I was just suddenly in a, in a South American rainforest [laughing] and it had such a gorgeous wholeness to it. Even though there was so many different timbre and, and instruments and pitches and that but it did, it was kind of homogenous as well. I just loved it and then, and then when the voice came in and I recognised what it was, it just fitted so perfectly, it just... It was really tremendous. Never heard a version like that before [laughing].

**6. Reflections on Attention/Engagement/Focus**

**The idea that lack of visual stimulus ie not live performers to watch, increases visualising imagination**.:

Sheilagh: I wanted to see what was making the noise. And, and, if, you know, if it, if it would be possible or if it was just all being syphoned through some sort of synthesiser. But if there were actual instruments…

Elaine: It’s a very… That piece was very, very visual, You know it was… I think, I think everyone has pictures in their minds about the beginning. As you say it was Dido’s lament, but at the start I think everyone obviously had visions in their heads.

Tony: Yes.

Peter: Yes. So it was, it was almost a visual effect, isn’t it?

**7. Connections with others’ responses:**

Janet: What Tony’s just said is very interesting, because I had a difference of experience. As soon, as soon as I started to recognise it I began to struggle to concentrate. The unfamiliar initial section totally absorbed me, funnily enough, and then I thought, ‘Oh, yeah. I know what this is.’ You know, and, and thoughts were intruding that are, you know, about other matters…

Tony: Oh, I can appreciate that too…

Janet: …loss of concentration.

Tony: …because initially my mind was trying to se– find rhythms…

**8. Recognitions/Epiphanies**

Peter: …although this is a personal thing, having a tendency towards instrumental music, I think I preferred it without having the voice. Although that pinpointed what the piece was immediately – it was from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* – but I think I would have preferred it without, particularly, I didn’t particularly like that scene. [laughing] But, and I think that was the emergence of ol– of old western music out of a montage of other sorts of music, I think. I like that effect.

Leah: I’ve sung that piece quite a lot and it was completely different. That’s the first time I’ve heard it sung like that. And it was a surprise, but it really melded with the… It brought it all together and it made it less alien.

Anthony:

And then gradually came the Purcell at the end of it and I felt a satisfaction when it actually appeared at the end, even though it wasn’t sung in the way it, in my view, it, it ought to have been sung. And it was surrounded by Christmas wrapping paper is all I could suggest, you know, as the way noise and pshhhhhh...

Rebecca: Yes, I got that sense of a sort of new kind of car– caressing and, sort of, order coming out of chaos as well.

Anne: There is a little bit where I smiled because I thought it was like someone coming in and saying, ‘What about me?’ …. and there was smiling.

**9. Aspects of performance**

I wanted to see what was making the noise. And, and, if, you know, if it, if it would be possible or if it was just all being syphoned through some sort of synthesiser. But if there were actual instruments……instruments that you could watch I would have been transfixed from the start. But it took me a wee while to get into it.

Bernie: I thought what made it is it sounded as if it wasn’t a very professional recording of this woman singing. And which made it sort of personal for me. I mean you were actually listening to this woman who had, she was trying to say something, she had feelings, she was relating to maybe the previous music, as opposed so some very well-produced, well-sung, well-pronounced….because initially it just annoyed me a bit, because I couldn’t hear the words right, but whether it was done on purpose it doesn’t really matter, it just, I felt this singer was personally involved in the rest of the music and was relating to it, as opposed to, ‘Right, we’ll bring in a singer,’ you know, it was, so honest I was well taken with the whole thing, I was quite captivated.

Merry:

Then Errollyn Waller's voice!  It seemed to fit the music perfectly, being gentle, pure and delicate.  And it fitted with the integrity of the previous instrumental music, too.  And the lyrics are so poignant, bringing associations of the story and Dido's broken heart.  This setting brought a rawness to the words that caught me by surprise the first time, as it was so unexpected.  The second time, I could see the connections clearly and was deeply impressed for a different reason; the power of the song in that context was like being given a precious gift.  The lyrics and melody suit the natural grace of this arrangement as well as a more traditional arrangement, in my view.

**10 Compositional Intent.**

Janet: …totally in it. But then, and I wasn’t distracted, as soon as I’d started…recognised that tune I thought, you know, I… Distractions arrived in my head. So there. I wonder if it was deliberate, that choice. See how things change half way through.

Tony: Do you think the first part of it was actually composed or whether it was just interesting sounds? Or was it just spontaneous composition?

Bede: It would have had… She had, there were some fragments from the very beginning, I think, of the, of Purcell. There’s a lot of electric guitar and also she’s what I would call a genre-bending composer and so she’s… as soon as, you know, put a, an electric guitar into something it has all… It brings into your mind that world, which she is wanting to do. She is wanting her music to, to reach many, many listeners. So that was her… So it’s a lot of use of electric guitar and repeated piano. The, the beginning of that would be broadly called in the Academy electroacoustic composition. In which the compositional aim is often to deceive the source of the sound. Be deceptive as to what the source of the sound is. So, so you have exactly that idea of what is…and also you said you felt challenged, also a composer might, might want to…kind of has a sense of form and they know how hard they can push the listener and they, they know if I, if I, if I don’t bring in the beat soon or…