

## CURATES and DUKES

### Mario Petrucci on poetry residencies, radio science & first things

Published in *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Dec. 05 (vol. 30, no. 4, pp.296-300) under the title 'Curates and bishops'

---

W.H. Auden once described being among scientists as feeling like a shabby curate who'd strayed into a room full of dukes. When I accepted the post as the first ever poet in residence at BBC Radio 3, I developed a mild case of nerves. Not full-blown duodenal heave; more a queasy sense of being a slightly shabby wordsmith among the inveterately glossolalic. *Talking*. Radio people are all so bloody good at it. Of course, like Auden, I was wrong to feel that way. At the Royal Philharmonic Society awards ceremony in 2004, the brilliant young conductor Ilan Volkov described Radio 3 as "family". Certainly, I was made to feel as far from shabby as one can imagine. Almost like family – though I knew from the outset it was something I'd also have to earn. Perhaps I can push my luck here and ask (hailing, as I do, from southern Italy) whether I joined the BBC family, or they *mine*? It's certainly in the balance as to which is larger. Talking of families, my emotional understanding of radio (and of opera) probably began in an Italian family kitchen. Everyone talking at once – and yet everyone perfectly understood. It was a miraculous example of a multiple cross-talk system with no tuning facility. And no volume control.

Anyway, those initial nerves quickly melted away. So much so, that I seriously wondered whether I should take in a small cylinder of helium (from my lab days) and gulp a lungful before going on air, just to give the whole thing a Donald Duck soprano shake-up. More sensibly, I'm wondering what I did to end up waist-deep in a writer's paradise: working with a community deeply attuned to the use of words and the subtleties of music. I also have to wonder if I'm suffering from a species of literary typecasting, as the 'frontier man' of residencies? I am often flown in, it seems, to capture bridgeheads – Radio 3, Imperial War Museum, Southwell Workhouse, Romford – but rarely get a chance to relax with more fluid or writer-centred follow-up residencies. Many of those inaugural residencies have involved a strong sense of locality, of place or space. What's more, they've continually drawn me into inventive inversions regarding my expectations of what poetry does. I'd been weaned on the notion that the ultimate goal of each poet is to "find her voice". Increasingly, however, and largely through these residencies, I've been approaching the realisation that writing is also about letting the voices find *you*.

So, how can poetry and radio each help the other? As a lapsed physicist, and (more recently) a poet, I've twice been trained (in rather different ways) to do my thinking through metaphor – and so, I'll allow an analogy to leap in. Radio works through the modulation of a carrier wave. This powerful electromagnetic wave drives through space, carrying the weak fizzing signal upon its shoulders. In many respects, poetry is the same. Its message is often in the detail, in those subtle departures from the predictably smooth curve. Indeed, our very existence on this planet is a modulating skin on the curve of the planet's back. But to focus purely on that modulation is to miss another, deeper, dimension to the analogy. The bulk of poetry, like the bulk of radio waves, is made up of that inaudible carrier wave. It's those dark, swilling, oscillating swells which cause the boats of received content to bob. The fact that so many aural forms – from music to cricket commentary – are not only possible on radio, but often preferred, says a great deal about the potential, that 'dark matter' of the medium. Poetry, and music, thrive on it.

Furthermore, poetry and radio involve similar types of absence. The absence of a screen, for example. Radio doesn't even possess that small black-and-white 'screen' of the printed page. In that sense, radio is connected at least as intimately to the aural traditions of poetry as the printed word. Moreover, great poetry and great radio share an immense – seemingly

paradoxical – challenge: to cultivate silence through the use of sound. By filling silence in profound ways, poetry and music can engender stillness of thought, a fixing of the gaze, a training of the ear. Indeed, even the dreaded ‘dead space’ of an interrupted radio broadcast (surely every programmer’s ultimate chimera) is not all bad. I’ve often experienced that sudden and unexpected silence not so much as an irritation but as grace – an opportunity for deeper creativity in the act of listening. Sometimes, it’s every bit as intriguing as an archived manuscript in the British Library which, inducing fascination as well as exasperation, abruptly breaks off.

If you can’t quite bring yourself to concur with that latter analogy, perhaps my next is even less palatable. It’s often said that radio – in funding terms – is the poor cousin of television? Well, I think poets understand how radio producers feel. We often get exactly that feeling around novelists (and equally may indulge ourselves in the consolation of a perceived superiority). I think it was Charles Bernstein who said: “This piece of paper costs approximately 1p. When a poem is published on it, however, it completely loses its value.” Well, we are not quite yet an age that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing; but we are certainly edging that way. I sense that the communities of poetry and radio (where and if such communities exist) share an inbuilt – though not entirely watertight – resistance to that tendency. Okay [I’m doing a ‘radio shrug’ here] – call me a schizoid optimist – but I really do believe there’s something in that. Maybe you feel poets are more like unattended radios? That is, you’ll find them jabbering away to themselves in the hope that someone – anyone – will pause at the doorway to listen. I’d prefer the more positive thought that if, like me, you leave a radio running when you’re out (to discourage burglars) then you may glean, in that habit, a good metaphor for why society should keep its radios, and its poets, turned on.

I mentioned earlier that I was once a physicist, and I would like to delve a little deeper into how a writer’s biography can inform and colour a residency. An ex-physicist is often worse than an ex-smoker. Having been a chain user of technology, the slightest whiff of gadgetry now sends me flying into a rage. I accost mobile phone users in the quiet coaches of trains, accusing them of making the entire world *Porlock*. I’m deeply suspicious of TV (“Life does not imitate art; it imitates bad television” – Woody Allen) and am even less sure about the much-vaunted web (Arthur C. Clarke: “Getting information from the Internet is like getting a glass of water from the Niagara Falls”). But there are specific advantages to having been a scientist, particularly with certain types of residency. For instance, my time at Romford/Havering during the Year of the Artist drew heavily on my understanding of geology, leading to a sequence of poems on the last Ice Age there, entitled *Thames*. This was used in a ‘poetry walk’ spanning the borough, with each poem in the sequence highlighting to residents some aspect of the geological treasures daily beneath their feet.

At Radio 3, my physics training was even more pertinent. First of all, I did actually understand the most technical aspects of radio. Secondly, physicists (just like many poets) are drawn to origins. Delving back in time, I’ve found that the first extended broadcast of the human voice was transmitted to ships across the Atlantic on 24 December 1906 from Brant Rock, Massachusetts by the Canadian engineer Reginald Fessenden. The broadcast involved a woman (please take note:) singing, and various other Christmas entertainments. According to one website:

“On Christmas Eve 1906, radio listeners near Brant Rock Massachusetts were startled to hear first a woman *singing* [my italics]..... next, someone reading a poem, and later, Reginald Aubrey Fessenden playing... on the violin.”

What I enjoy here is not so much the obvious typo, but the implication it generates of a hierarchy of awfulness, culminating in Fessenden’s violin playing: worse even than the reciting of a poem! Sadly, what the many accounts of that ancestral broadcast seem to have in common (and this is particularly demoralising for an Italian appointee to poet in residence at Radio 3) is not just Marconi’s relegation to silver medal on radio’s rostrum of pioneers, but

also the insidious fact that no one, anywhere, seems to remember anything *at all* about that poem. I'd dearly like to know what it was. The musical composition is clearly named: *O Holy Night* by Charles François Gounod. The prose is carefully cited as the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. A phonograph recording of Handel's *Largo* is also mentioned. But the poem? It has sunk into obscurity as surely as Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*. Not good.

At this stage, I have no cast-iron idea concerning what the eventual benefits of this radio-poetry synergy will be. I've written seventeen pieces, mainly around three of the themes encapsulated by Radio 3's 2004 *Listen Up!* festival: 'Endangered Instruments', 'Music and Well-being' and 'Futuristic Symphonies'. Perhaps the most far-reaching effect, though, for me as a writer, will be to underscore my sense that radio manages to approach, as the philosopher Ivan Illich put it, the condition of a *convivial* medium: that is, a means of "creative intercourse among persons... the opposite of industrial productivity" (*Tools for Conviviality*, p.11). It's also the next best thing to live performance, particularly in its plural – and pluralising – use of voice. After all, what *is* freedom, if not many-voiced?

Given that my opening reference to Auden was cast in a slightly nervous and negative voice, let me now return to him more positively. In his poem *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, Auden famously informs us: "Poetry makes nothing happen." That line has become a classic quote in support of the view that poetry is, at heart, ineffectual and impractical. But, later in that same poem, Auden writes: "With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade us to rejoice." That's a clue, I think, to how we might re-read Auden's preceding phrase. Perhaps the sense is not: Poetry makes *nothing happen*; but: Poetry does not *make* anything happen. That is to say: poetry does not force, cajole or constrain; it persuades. It guides us to openings, possibilities, and ultimately to that empowering 'nothing' which occasionally suggests itself, tangibly, beyond content – rather like that carrier wave in radio.

I know how a comment like that can sometimes seem more like an act of faith than a statement of realisable fact. But let's remember that we actually live in a far from faithless age. Each time a poet sets pen to paper, every time a scientist establishes an experiment, it is an act of faith. And radio personnel, like poets *and* scientists, have faith aplenty. They believe that the laws of radio physics tomorrow will be the same as they are today; that a programme broadcast under correct conditions will be duly received at the other end; and, most remarkable of all, they have faith that placing a poet in their midst will achieve something meaningful, perhaps even significant. They're taking a chance. But if my time at Radio 3 has justified a single atom of that faith, I shall be proud – and relieved. I'll end with a wonderful African story on the subject of faith. It involves a desert community who haven't had any rain for years. Things are looking grim, so they call a prayer meeting. All the villagers attend, without exception; and yet, the leader is unhappy. Why? Because, among all those hundreds of people, only one small girl has thought to... bring an umbrella. I had no intention of becoming Radio 3's poetry Duke – whatever that might mean – but I was, for a while at least, its not-so-shabby curate. What's more, whether or not radio has any great need of rain, I did remember to bring my brolly.

---

In the published / ISR version (entitled 'Curates and bishops') the Auden quote was accessed from a dubious source – it was wrongly worded, and also referred incorrectly to bishops rather than dukes; it is amended here.

**For further information on Mario's BBC Radio 3 residency:**  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/listenup/newwriting.shtml>

*Web version of article (March 2010)*

*Crystal Set* concerns my own 'Big Bang' experience of radio. Some new radio station (in the late sixties?) was looping waltzes and marches for weeks, as a test signal. And – strangely – that signal always seemed to get stronger at dusk. Stranger still, coaxing music from that primitive crystal set made me more profoundly aware, somehow, of silence.

## CRYSTAL SET

One matchbox. One sixpenny  
crystal. One pancake coil  
for coarse tuning. No

battery. A fortnight's  
torture while the earphone's  
mustard stopper dallied in the post.

The soldering iron sent up its  
tiny smoke signals. Then  
I slid a thruppenny bit

by bit across that coil  
in a brass on lead eclipse  
to reel in the Radetzky March –

those cymbal-happy ranks of  
sound far-off behind static  
that could pass as Time.

Blue Danubes trickled  
behind watersheds of hiss.  
All summer they looped those

same few Strausses over and  
over – that champagne of  
waltz and polka going

flat as I watched (with  
one ear pressed) the shadow  
of our apple tree sundial the lawn

until shadow began to dissolve  
into dusk. Which only made  
the Strauss grow firmer.

Closer. As if that music  
were the very first to enter  
a garden. As though some fresh-

created body of water were being  
brought home wave upon wave  
like an ocean to its shell.

---

*With acknowledgements to BBC Radio3*

## ANNOUNCEMENT

Gentlemen and Ladies.  
Tonight's performance  
is about

to end.  
Would you be so slick  
as to turn on

your mobile phones?  
Some fraud always forgets  
and is caught

listening  
to music. Remember – this  
orchestra has come

a mighty long way  
to hear you. And the world  
is broad-

                  casting  
into this very auditorium  
in constant waves of blight

                  – how it craves  
to know you are *not*  
on the train.

                  Together  
we can turn this entire  
planet

                  into Porlock. So –  
turn on your phones. Wait  
for those same

                  few bright  
bars. And in that mock tone  
answer *Yes?* to your own

                  thin applause.

*With acknowledgements to BBC Radio3*

---

## **TROMBONE**

*Steam locomotives carried sand –  
to drop on the rails when traction was lacking.*

I saw this guy once  
work his cylinders so

hard the pistoned brass  
seemed to drive some

massive axle only he  
could see – grinding at

that same good yard of  
track – his stalled truck

-load of jazz getting no-  
where sliding on grease

yet charging up on itself –  
charging till all our stacks

were leaning forward weak  
with smoke: flagging for that

held-back stroke when  
finally he'd give it

sand

and notes (taking sudden  
grip) would fling us

steaming with him out and  
into tunnels down

glinting girdered rails  
of sound

*With acknowledgements to BBC Radio3  
& Poetry Review (95:4, Winter 2005/6)*