

Before and After Listening to Judy Klein's The Wolves of Bays Mountain

(OPEN SPACE CD 15)

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I was asked if I'd like to review this piece, but reviewing a CD is too hard for me. A simple description would be nothing less than that a written disservice. A critique would be nothing more than a personal opinion. It's finding the space between that's so difficult. And I have only recently begun to realise fully that listening is all there is to music - and that listening extends outwards, either side of listening to the sound that music makes. There's before listening, after listening - and then, there's listening to the music in between (and perhaps that's the part of listening that is inexpressible, in words at least).

It's a strange and daunting kind of responsibility, being an audience of one on behalf of a readership of...well, however many of you invisible readers there are out there listening to this voice, now piping up inside your head. But essentially it's just the two of us - you and me - right? So I could try and have a listen for you, share my before and after, and hope that you'll be interested enough to venture in between.

BEFORE (listening)

A piece about wolves. Wolves - well, that's just too much information already; or at least so much information, in a big jumble of jostling associations and deep anxieties. (I speak for myself, but you'll have your own wolves, I know). Wolves at the door, running with wolves, wolfing down your dinner, Red Riding Hood and her difficult relationship with lupine emotions, 'in bocca al lupo!' - an Italian good luck wish from one exam student to another - into the wolf's mouth! Wolves in documentary programmes, obligingly tearing the flesh off some hapless four-legged victim while, across the screen, you maul your roast beef TV dinner. Jekyll and Hyde, wolf-men, wolf-boys, wolf tones, wolf whistles - wolves surging forward in a baying pack of nocturnal associations... all this before listening.

So although I haven't even torn off the CD shrink-wrap yet, the title of Klein's work has a firm psychological hold (with teeth). We all know the sound of wolves, howling into the black night, out there beyond sight - somewhere in the distance, but not as far away as we would like. Because wolves are tenebrous presences in the human psyche, aren't they? We have made monsters of them, ones that are irreversibly present in what Virginia Woolf (in Orlando, her fantasy on equivocal identity) calls that 'dark hollow at the back of the head when the visible world is obscured for the time'. Right now, I've woken my pack from their satiated slumber, and no doubt you've got a bunch of them pawing away at some half-buried roots, back there in that dark place. It's too late to get rid of them.

But I've never met a real wolf, in situ, have you? Years ago I did once stand outside the fence at London Zoo while a dejected wolf padded mournfully from side to side of its cage, looking at both me and Regents Park with distrustful eyes. Maybe that subjugated wolf was wondering - along with me - how things could have come to this. Does that count as real? In the 1987 cult film *Withnail and I*, a dark comedy set in 1960s London, Richard E. Grant's *Withnail* rants drunkenly in front of that same fence, watched by that same (I like to imagine) pacing wolf. But while Grant is acting his socks off, the wolf is unaware of the distinction between imagination and reality. Yet we are also unaware of that distinction, because although we don't know anything about wolves,

we imagine we do. Howl like a wolf – you think you know that sound, don't you? It shivers through you from some experience you think you've had. But we are so distant from the reality of wolves, and so bewildered by our imaginative lupine bestiary, that we have absolutely no idea what they might think or feel, or why they might sing.

So to choose wolves as a subject for music – rather than a field-recording – well, that's a tricky one: it's not only inevitable that ears will be pricked for certain associations - and may be deaf to others - but you run the risk of anthropomorphizing. All that before listening. And if you want to change minds – or to invite minds to change -you've got a bit of work to do.

I'm looking forward to listening, I've heard Judy Klein's music before, and liked it. And it does stay in the mind, well, my mind anyway (a reviewer has no right to assume someone else's vision). I remember *From the Journals of Felix Bosonnet* a speech piece that austere grips the heart, with a masterful pacing of spoken recitation and bells. And I've heard her *Elements* pieces, remembering them now as intricate, delicate, suspensions of sound – web-like, hanging there in space, shimmering. There's something special about that ability to put sound in physical space, and leave it hanging in another space afterwards. So I'm looking forward to hearing how that sensibility will engage with this rather different subject.

Moving closer, removing the packaging... Over the page, the liner notes describe Klein's project, recording a family of wolves living in Bays Mountain Park, in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee. This park is their natural habitat, a world away from Regents Park, London. Klein's notes are to the point and intelligently unintrusive: she remarks that 'In the piece, the wolves are heard much as I heard them myself, sometimes only footsteps away, and also transformed, such as occurs in the realm of imagination, memory and dream'. There is a lot to be pondered in that one sentence; about what we are hearing – Klein's hearing – and where we are going, - between various states of transformation - and how we will measure space – in footsteps (a human distance, easily outrun). But how to listen? Klein she goes on to describe a little more of how the piece is put together, structurally, and in sonic terms, but there is nothing didactic – and I am so grateful for that – to tell us how to listen. (Many could learn from that, I'll add – didactically...) Klein also provides a brief note on the wolf pack itself, whose evocative human-endowed names – Navarro, Kashtin, Djenoun, Askina, Nayehi and Kanati – provide a way of acknowledging the individuals. Already, I'm longing to hear the results. What a wonderful thing to do! To go out into the mountains, with the wolves, be with them, and share the experience in sound. And Klein's acknowledgements, to the collection of friends and contacts that assisted and supported her along the way, reveal just how willing people are to understand that kind of wonder.

Nearly there....but still some expectations before listening. Electronic music like this (I am assuming I know what this will be like, I may have drawn the wrong conclusions....) thrives on our associative powers for 'real world' sounds. If I know that sound, I have all kinds of memories and associations around it. (A door, a sigh, an ice-cream van's chimes, a lover's voice, the howling cry of a wolf in the night...It's kinda obvious, so I won't bore you with dumb-ass theory today....). Documentary field-recordings bring all our knowledge with them, which can be an encumbrance.

So now, *The Wolves of Bays Mountain* are slipping elegantly into my CD player. More, after listening.

BETWEENTIMES (listening)

The Wolves of Bays Mountain, by Judy Klein (press play....)

AFTER (listening)

Well, you really must listen to this piece, it's astounding! I can't believe 21 minutes have passed; it seems like the wolves had just begun, but now they've gone. Or rather, I'm back here. Wait...a little more distance is required.

These wolves are not as I expected, and this work is so much more than I was hoping for – and the sound of wolves is just so.....strangely familiar. There I was, thinking I'd bring all that fur-lined baggage to listening, and Klein's powerful work let me leave it at the roadside. Who needs to drag a suitcase along a dirt path, when there are unknown wolves, just footsteps away? And of course, that's one of the points she's making. Or rather, they're making – because the wolves communicate a great deal, in their own voice.

I could describe the many wonderful passages in this work – the rending morning chorus of singing wolves; the running and snarling, accompanied by the growing agitation of crows above; the nocturnal sonic landscape, filled with insects and the rising song of the family of wolves, simply being; the haunting duet that ends the work. (Klein calls it a love song, and indeed who is to say that wolves cannot love?) All this extraordinary sound, and with it the extraordinary privilege of eavesdropping on lives that are no doubt aware of, but unconcerned by, human infiltration.

Because she's there: her sources are pristine field-recordings, material that, I think, is both enticing and problematic for music in several respects. As a composer I've found it's not long before someone asks me 'so, just how did you record that sound?', 'where did you have the microphone?', 'where were you?'. Listening, it's difficult not to get hung up on thinking about the microphone, and even more so in such a strange, un-human environment as this. How to get beyond that wanting to envisage how 'there' was, to a point when you are there, in listening?

Perhaps you just can't force it. Certainly, as I listen, I'm wondering how she recorded some of these sounds, the yelping, scuffling to and fro of running wolves – a breathless, powerful pounding run, paws springing from dry earth, a prey (in mind or actuality), barking and growling with exhilaration. Perhaps she was hanging from a tree, or hovering near them – heart in mouth - or perhaps the microphones were secreted there and she was safely down the road - but somehow I think not. But then, it doesn't matter, because soon all thoughts of why and when just disappear.

The more problematic disappearing act is to dissolve all those surface associations we have for 'wolves', while simultaneously connecting directly to the related – but more profound - oneiric imagining of wolves that is etched deeper in our psyche. Generally we go back and forth between these, because the former is our only way of articulating the latter. But this is music.

There is very little transformed sound in this piece. I found that intriguing. Here is a composer who, in other works, uses the csound processing environment to produce an abstract digital canvas. Here is a work that could have been a sonic fantasy, sources obscured and acousmatically reinvented as abstract music. And then I began to realise that transformation might have a different purpose here. I really think that Klein enables us to access our psychic connection to wolves in a new way, through the transformation of sound. I think she achieves this in a very subtle way that gives transformed sound a psychological role, and transforms listening.

First, before anything other than what the listener brings to the work, there is an extended passage of obviously processed, transformed sound. A slowly twisting web of filtered tones, aimless, almost sine waves, encompassing a minor third, quietly settling and re-settling. This is not vocal timbre – quite - but the register is within the human vocal range. So there are allusions to the inner world here. They are un-explicit, possibly unconscious, but certainly related to

allusions we customarily allow music to draw. Out of this sound the howling of wolves emerges, revealed as the source of those filtered resonances.

Too long to be a simple introduction, too powerful to be a simple frame, the opening sets up an expectation of more of the same - or at least it did for me. I have to admit to surprise when what actually happens is that, rather than integrating transformed and non-transformed wolf cries in a prolonged elegy, Klein appears to abandon one piece in favour of another. Transformed sound dissolves and the major part of this long work is made from recordings of wolves, and their environment. These are - as she states in her liner notes (but my ears had forgotten by now) - largely unedited.

I think this decision is inspired. The work could have started with unadulterated recordings of wolves in their environment; that opening could have been omitted without feeling its loss. I for one would still have been gripped by the sounds of wolves, and the drama of their lives. It would have been a satisfying aural documentary, beautifully structured, elegantly conceived. Listening, our previous knowledge of wolves would have been supplemented by an intelligent presentation of the natural world. PBS programming for electroacoustic music majors. But Klein's stroke of genius is to put a barrier between what we thought we knew, and what we are knowing, now. This tangle of slow, undulating processed sounds went on long enough to become an impenetrable fence; not caging us, but shielding the view, and drawing us away from remembering all those associations, all those things about wolves we 'knew'. When the 'real world' emerges after that opening - well, it's just luminous in its presence. There's no going back.

Wolves are here, now, in our ears - and I mean in our ears, they're so near. For quite a few minutes I feared for Klein's safety - especially when wolves run back and forth, their breath heavy and laboured, the chase serious, for real. Whoever is listening, they're way too close for comfort. And I'm listening. This is not a comfortable piece - and so many grateful thanks for this. This is a piece that is respectful of a certain kind of power, and lets us know it.

But there remains something strange. The transformed sounds don't entirely disappear. Why not, haven't they done their job by now? Yet, here and there in the natural environment, just occasionally, there is a faint cluster or a distant filtered undulation. It's as if the precarious, shimmering divide between the conscious and oneiric world is quietly, but constantly, acknowledged. Real wolves and dream wolves - one transforms the other, in the space between our ears. And then, near the end, there is another passage of transformed vocal sound - their voices, not ours - reminiscent of the opening. But this time, the sound of wolves is already in our ears. Listening to the wolves of Bays Mountain.

And really, that's all I wanted to talk about, because your listening is more important than words. Leaving aside my complete admiration for someone who records these animals, close up and so beautifully. Leaving aside the fact that the landscape recorded is a joy to experience - not only wolves, but also birds, the sounds of insects, air and earth, the world apparently free of any technology other than the microphone. Leaving aside Klein's customary, but unaffected, sophistication when it comes to her chosen sound processing environment, csound. Leaving aside all that (as if you can) - this piece just dreams reality so well.

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