



COLERIDGE'S RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

Background and Inception

This project came about during a TNWK residency at Coleridge Community College in Cambridge. The overall aim of which was to produce a range of sound-art projects for Taxi Gallery's FM and internet radio broadcast in May-June 2005 www.radiotaxi.org.uk. TNWK (www.tnwk.net) is a co-authorship between Kirsten Lavers and cris cheek. In this instance we were working with the sound artist Simon Keep.

The decisions made during this particular recording of the Rime Of the Ancient Mariner were taken, for the large part, out of practical necessity. Even the initial idea came about as a solution to a problem; namely how to introduce ourselves to an entire school community, and at the same time to introduce that community to some of the exigencies of recording and thereby generate further projects for Radio Taxi. We wanted to offer everybody a taste of what a recording project for radio might involve. We wanted to find a project that got people throughout the school talking about sound. We wanted to take a sonic, rather than photographic, school portrait. Our model was partly inspired by the early work of Mierle Ukeles with the New York Department of Sanitation (where she has been official artist-in-residence since 1977). Her introductory action was a Handshake Ritual, consisting of visiting all of New York City's fifty-nine community districts, and facing 8,500 sanitation workers, shaking hands and saying to each, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." Our aim was something that personal, that momentary and that focused. Our proposal was significantly less ambitious in scale.

We were on a long drive, during the entirety of which we brainstormed a number of different possibilities to achieve our goals. As is often the case, many of those possibilities were hare-brained. Frankly we half-expected that the Headteacher and Head of English (Martin Campbell) might treat this corny ploy, of foregrounding the school's namesake through an epic poem of more than two hundred years standing with disdain. However, partly due to the fact that Martin had just been teaching the poem in his Key Stage 3 curriculum and since they both grasped that this was indeed an appropriate solution to the issue of getting everybody involved, they welcomed it. The length of the poem, in terms of its number of lines (625), resonated at that moment (July 2004) with the school's population, further sealing its fitness.

The school is culturally diverse, as evidenced in the CD recording of the 'Neighborhood Is' poem. More than 17 languages were represented there at the time of this recording. The resultant diversity of voices and of voicings in the recording are eerily anticipated in the poem itself:

'Slowly the sounds came back again,
now mix'd, now one by one

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the skylark sing;
Sometimes all the little birds that are
How they seem'd to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!

And now 'twas like all instruments
Now like a lonely flute;
And now it is an angel's song,
That makes the Heavens be mute'

Some listeners have failed to appreciate the diversity of Englishes embedded in the recording, missing a more representative obviation, such as Brummie, Geordie, Irish and so forth. That is to miss the point of the riches offered by this particular school. There is no pretense to be fully representative. There is the insistence on this particular community, in this particular neighborhood, a very different kind of politics.

The poem

Differing versions of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* carry the sense of the ways in which language as printed and language as spoken change through time. In the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), written and published jointly by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, its title read as *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*. Many of its spellings were deliberately archaic in an attempt to underscore its setting in late Medieval maritime lore. Indeed in the introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth pre-empts criticism based on derogatory observations in respect of its old-fashioned tropes by saying that the Rime is 'professionally written in imitation of the style, as well as of the spirit of the elder poets'. However even by the time of the second edition in 1800 Coleridge had already modernized much spelling and the title had been revised into the format that we know now. He continued working on versions of the text over the next decades. By the time of its publication in the volume *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) spellings had been modernized throughout, several stanzas had been removed and verb tenses changed.

The narrative in the poem has diverse sources. According to Steven Jones the poem was a response to a prevalence of spook balladry in England at that time, exemplified by Thomas Taylor's translation of Gottfried Burger's *Lenore* in the *Monthly Magazine* (March 1796) and drawn to the attention of Coleridge by Charles Lamb in a letter of July that year. In direct reference to the impact of *Lenore* Southey wrote a fiercely nationalist critique of the Rime as 'German sublimity'.

Written accounts by both poets of its compositional and publication histories present myths that can be understood as central to the development of Romanticism in the English context. They suggest that it was to be a collaborative effort, penned simply to pay for the expenses of a walking trip through publication in the *Monthly Magazine*. Wordsworth had been reading Shelvocke's *A Voyage round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea* (1726), during which one member of the crew shoots an albatross which had followed the ship in bad weather. With an appropriate humour one friend of Wordsworth, the Rev. Alexander Dyce, recounts the poem as founded on a dream. The alleged dreamer, John Cruikshank a friend of

Coleridge, who lived in Nether Stowey (where Coleridge lived in the Quantock Hills between Bridgewater and Minehead), had dreamed of a skeleton ship with figures in it.

Logistics of Recording

Once that idea had taken hold and the school had agreed to run with it, a collaborative grappling with the logistics of actually doing it took over. We are completely indebted to the organizational élan of Martin Campbell for making the recording process run so smoothly. We made audio-visual presentations at school assembly in the weeks leading up to the recording, describing the project and introducing Radio Taxi. The idea of a sonic as opposed to photographic portrait was fore-grounded. Projected images included the well-known Doré illustrations to the poem. The ecological concerns of the poem, through its theme of super-nature teetering along the verges of self-parody, and its relevance to contemporary geo-political policy-making were discussed. The recent and still current glut of high gothic clichés so apparent from horror and sci-fi fantasy movies and TV series (Buffy the Vampire Slayer would be the classic example) were further points of contact with the narrative and linguistic material of the poem for many in the school. Indeed the Rime continues to give rise to other works, both parodic and imitative, from a comic-book version by Hunt Emerson (1989) to a rock lyric by Iron Maiden (both linked to from this site).

One meeting room was chosen to act as our studio for the week of recording; a room beside the main office on the ground floor. So people were coming and going in reception much of each day, in addition to hordes of kids and teachers moving about in adjacent corridors and above. One line close to the beginning of the mariner's narrative, 'Below the Lighthouse top' bears the indelible scars of that signal to noise interference and has been impossible to clean up. We didn't try to soundproof the room, but just simply dealt with its acoustic as a given. So, for example, the firing up and the hiss of the heating system was an additionally discontinuous presence from one moment of recording to the next.

Vocalists were taken from their classes, gathered in a common room (coffee bar) at the end of the nearest corridor, and were brought to the foyer outside this improvised studio in groups of 5-6. At that point, and for the first time they were given their 'line'. They subsequently entered the studio environment one at a time, sat down in front of the microphone (with its tatty stocking popper-stopper – to prevent vocal articulation 'popping' the microphone) were given the signal to record and spoke. Very little, if any, direction was given. The idea was that they would say their line as they heard it: in their manner, with their cadence and their intonation. On occasion it was necessary to explain a word, but for the most part that was the nature of the exchange. In anticipation of potential problems with vicarious interference into the recording process each person read their line twice. Often people entered the room somewhat apprehensively and left feeling that they had really achieved something. The difference in their demeanour spoke volumes about the profundity of this experience, reflecting the fact that their voice had been valued. After recording they were invited to choose a badge each focusing in on a detail of the Doré illustrations; there were seven choices, the series of which projected a pocket narrative of the poem. In a further complexity, which had been discussed but we had never imagined that Martin could pull off, as the Mariner's narrative progresses, so does the age of the pupils. The tale is told from unbroken, through breaking to broken voices.

Textual Edits

Between the school's agreement to make the project happen and the recording dates there was a gap of about 6 months. During that time the school's population shrunk quite significantly. When we first pitched the project the school was under the government's own albatross of 'special measures'. In the interim it had received the Ofsted seal of approval. However the local council then announced its intention to close the school and parents had begun moving their children away. It was considered to be too small. By today's standards the fact that all of the teachers know every pupil in the school is considered a reason to force an amalgamation into a larger institution. Since making this recording Coleridge Community College has been 'saved' by federating with Parkside Community College.

As the days of recording approached we talked about how many lines we might be able to record on each of the five days allotted, about the possibility of illness further reducing our contributor-pool and of making some pre-emptive cuts. There was also the issue of what to do if the total number of people available to voice each line during that week dropped below the total number of lines requiring a voice. It seemed that we needed to lose about fifty-to-one hundred lines – a significant abridgement of the full text. In the end we made some advance and some day-by-day impromptu decisions. One or two anachronisms such as Mary Queen could be excised without too much being lost. The biggest decision taken was to cut the conversation between the 'two voices in the air' that abuts the end of Part 5 and the beginning of Part 6. It seemed the more mawkish section of writing and the one with which a school population in the early twenty-first century would make least contact. Its turn from eco-supernature concerns to overt religiosity brought out some of Coleridge's most clunky writing and it was the only section that suggested itself to go entirely.

There are other minor alterations in the text as printed which arose out of the recorded performance, namely some small, yet intriguing, shifts introduced by the performers themselves. One example would be that of a gender reorientation in 'And she shone bright and on the right' (instead of he shone bright), utterly fascinating in terms of the sun. Another is 'And a (rather than the) good south wind still blew behind'.

Editing the Recording

When editing began there were over 1200 separate sound files, one version of each line in each file. Choices needed to be made between the two versions of every line before they could be spliced together. That activity in itself brought an intense engagement with subtle variations of intonation into play. There were attendant issues of inter-linear placement. How much time to put between each line and then how to begin to represent Coleridge's stanzaic structure were critical decisions. It would have been possible to place lines in far more proximity to each other than is the case offered here. But to do so would have begun to erase the differences, subtle at times, between the 'Englishes' made apparent by leaving each line slightly more an object in its own right. There will be those who argue that something of the enjambment of Coleridge's poetry is lost to artifice by placing such emphasis upon the line. We welcome comments on such issues on this site. The core fact remains that it is only by running with such artifice (and these are after all decisions that the poet makes – this line goes no further and then the next begins) that the idea of the sonographic portrait could be realized. There is a hint to the tension between the line as unit and the sentence as unit in the fact that it

is the Mariner who is voiced so fiercely line by line; whereas other characters such as the hermit, the pilot, the wedding-guest, the narrator are voiced by one voice.

There is one historical precedent worth mentioning since it was another model by which the fierce editing was inspired, the *Radio Ballads* produced by Ewan Mac Coll, Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger between 1957 and 1964 that were distinctive because of the precise ear for speech cadence which Parker brought to their editing. Editing the Rime was exceptionally labor intensive as might be imagined. Not only did each line have to be calibrated in terms of those immediately preceding and following it, but each voice required slightly different adjustments in terms of volume modulation, equalisation and placement in the emergent mix.

The Soundscape

Noises off presented an issue from the outset. Planes overhead, footsteps, cars passing outside, the hiss of the central heating system all brought their charms and their grain to the recording. Simon Keep worked sonic imagination fully into play by making other recordings around the school throughout the week that might provide raw material for transformation and composition into an accompanying soundtrack. He worked with other groups of pupils to record the sound of water gushing in the pipes, the deafening roar of an assembly, creaking floors, the electronic buzzes and blips in the computer labs, the wind in the school courtyard and such like. These recordings became the basis for composing. Several versions were rehearsed before the mix produced for broadcast. Rehearsed is an appropriate term since we all spent time literally recording performed mixes of the soundtrack and the vocal track before moving towards any final cut. Source recordings were mixed and processed 'live' and the recordings of those performances became material that was carried forwards into more developed versions. The soundtrack serves many different functions. One is simply to mask the ambient interference of the school environment, to even its dissonances into something more composed. The second is to float the text into an ambient drift the shape of which gives the narrative arc an additional buoyancy. Thirdly it brings together the sounds of the physical body of the school with the voices of those inhabiting that structure. Fourthly it very much sets a mood that sustains the listener and places the poem into a more contemporary aural environment. There is a whole world of such music, which stands quite beautifully apart from poetry and we would recommend that those who enjoy the soundscape of the piece take the time to listen to more.

The CD publication and website

Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner was broadcast twice over the course of Radio Taxi's 9 day transmission in late May/early June 2005. Amongst the many positive responses from listeners was one surprising email from Canada, a former Coleridge pupil in the 1950s who had inadvertently come across the Radio Taxi internet broadcast at the precise moment that we were playing the recording! In July 2005, a DVD version was presented to the International Poetry Conference in Cork and gathered significant positive comment from the UK and USA academics and poets attending. This presentation occurred on the same day as London suffered its first suicide terror attack, the resonances between the multi-cultural voicing of an English canonical text that partly addresses the repercussions of random, unwarranted violence and this event were obvious to many. The Friends of Coleridge literary society expressed an interest in supporting the broader dissemination of project and teachers from the school were excited by its potential as a resource for their 'Mariner' lesson plans.

So, it seemed worth pushing the project towards publication in CD format. The accompanying website is not simply a purchasing portal. It includes a range of ideas and information to inspire teachers to include the ‘Mariner’ in their Key Stage 3 & 4 teaching plans. Coleridge is on the National Curriculum as an option for teachers to choose from but many avoid the Mariner as being too difficult a text to engage 13 – 16 year olds. The website will grow over coming months to include ideas, comments and examples of work created by students in response to these resources.

The CD includes an additional project arising from TNWK’s work in the school. ‘Neighbourhood Is’ was devised by Martin Campbell and a group of English students all of whom also speak a language other than English fluently. This simple poem in the form of a list of keywords explicitly celebrates contrast and difference.

‘Neighbourhood Is’

Dark
Green

Moody
Friendly

Bad
Kind

Polluted
Uncrowded

Dull
Fun

Congested
Peaceful

Unsafe
Trustworthy

Gossip
Respectful

Crumbled
Modern

Contrasting
Culture

Neighbourhood is

The poem was translated for recording into all the languages spoken fluently in the school – a task which in itself raised many thorny issues of cross-cultural translation for those taking part. One student who is actively discouraged from speaking his native language at home (a

refugee family) was so keen to participate that he secretly brought a dictionary to school so that he could double check his translation and pronunciation before being recorded.

Seventeen languages are represented in the final recording including: Bangla, German, Welsh, Chinese, French, English, Kosovan, Phillipino, Moroccan Arabic (southern and northern dialects), Spanish, Malalayam, Creole, Czech, Turkish and Sudanese. The edit deliberately mixes up all of these voicings and is floated over a field recording made by cris cheek of a Spanish town square at dusk. The resulting five minute piece suggests a multi-cultural crowd animatedly talking about their neighbourhood.

We are keen to foreground 'neighbourhood' as a term embracing difference in today's multi-cultural society, offering a useful alternative to the more fashionable term, community. Neighbourhood has a geographical emphasis, people living in a neighbourhood share location in common but sometimes (often) little else. Indeed, a neighbourhood where people do share other life aspects such as ethnicity, lifestyle or religion can be seen negatively, as an enclave or ghetto. Neighbourhood, emphasises the sharing of place and implicitly accepts accompanying differences, whereas community emphasises commonality and attempts to diminish, deny or erase difference.

It is for this reason that the CD package declares Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner as an essay on contemporary English(es) as spoken by the pupils, teachers and support staff of Coleridge Community College, Cambridge.

A sonic portrait of the 'neighbourhood' that is an entire school.

TNWK
Nov 2005