“MOOD-STUFF” AND “METAPHORIC UTTERANCE:”
NORMAN CORWIN’S RADIO ART

A THESIS IN
Musicology

Presented to the Faculty of the University
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MUSIC

by
TROY AUGUSTUS CUMMINGS

B.M. University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2004

Kansas City, Missouri
2013
“MOOD-STUFF” AND “METAPHORIC UTTERANCE:”

NORMAN CORWIN’S RADIO ART

Troy A. Cummings, Candidate for Master of Musicology Degree

University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2013

ABSTRACT

Norman Corwin (1910-2011) is widely acclaimed as the best radio writer in early American radio art (from the early 1920s to 1950). Ample research has been done on him as a radio dramatist, patriotic propagandist, and innovative journalist yet there are areas of his radio art career that have had little or no research. His development as a radio artist before he became a nationally discussed figure has had little scholarship as well as his activity in musical composition which had a formative impact on his radio art. In addition there is a need for clear statements of his aesthetic theories of radio art.

This study directly attempts to fill these gaps in scholarship using original scripts, published letters and interviews, historical recordings as well as interviews with Corwin. There is a specific focus on his style as a radio artist rather than his political views or his larger cultural setting.

The conclusions to this study of Corwin’s work have broad application to radio art studies, supporting an argument for inclusive definitions of the genres radio art and radio play and exhibiting how musicological analytical approaches to radio play analysis enhance existing literary ones.
The underlisted, appointed by the Dean of University of Missouri-Kansas City have examined a thesis titled “‘Mood-Stuff’ and ‘Metaphoric Utterance:’ Norman Corwin’s Radio Art,” presented by Troy A. Cummings, candidate for the Master of Musicology degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

S. Andrew Granade, Ph.D.
Conservatory of Music and Dance

William A. Everett, Ph.D.
Conservatory of Music and Dance

Paul Rudy, DMA
Conservatory of Music and Dance

Angela C. Elam, MFA
Communications Studies
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................ iii
PREFACE.......................................................................................................... vi
SPECIAL THANKS.............................................................................................. vii

Chapters

1. INTRODUCTION.......................................................................................... 1
2. NERO’S NOËL............................................................................................... 20
3. CONTINUITY AND CONTENT:
   THE INNARDS OF RADIO ......................................................................... 46
4. CORWIN, COMPOSER AND COLLABORATOR......................................... 72
5. RADIgenic RADIOPhONICS:
   DISSECTING THE SOUND EFFECT......................................................... 95
6. CONCLUSION .............................................................................................. 122

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY........................................................................... 128

VITA ................................................................................................................. 135
Corwin died on October 18, 2011. Throughout the writing of this thesis he was generous
with his time on the phone and in person, and he granted me wide freedom to access and obtain
recordings and photocopies from his special collections. During a visit with him in 2008, he
signed my copy of *More by Corwin*, inscribing:

```
To Troy Cummings

who has my number, and I invite him to call!

Best wishes,

Norman Corwin
wine 2008
```

Certainly the time is ripe for this scholarship, and I hope that I have truly got his number in this
study. With Norman Corwin’s best wishes, I continue.
SPECIAL THANKS

I would especially like to thank:

Jeanette Berard of the American Radio Archives for years of answering questions, keen incite, and prodigal generosity.

Illiana Semmler and her husband George for their kindness, hospitality, the scores, scripts, and photos they sent me home with, and for giving me my first true glimpse of the man Alexander Semmler.

Jamie Cummings for vacating his tiny New York City apartment for a wandering gypsy cousin he barely knows.

Paul Flahive for showing mercy on me and letting me slip into Third Coast International Audio Festival 2006. That one act transformed the way I thought about radio art and was the impetus of this entire thesis.

Chuck Haddix and Kelly Martin of the Marr Sound Archives for always clearing off a turntable when I needed one and for taking such good care of a dragon’s hoard worth of historical American radio art in sound.

Justin Schaeffer for a hard wood floor to sleep on in Downtown LA and for giving me his duvet for a mattress when it was obvious I was not sleeping.

And finally, my thesis committee, the radio artist Angela Elam, Dr. William Everett, Dr. S. Andrew Granade, and Dr. Paul Rudy, for their patient guidance and friendship.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Again the Ghost sped on, above the black and heaving sea – on, on – until, being far away, as he told Scrooge, from any shore, they lighted on a ship.¹

On broadcasting’s nativity, Christmas Eve 1906, Reginald Fessenden sent a holiday greeting from the shore at Brant Rock, Massachusetts, to ships in the Atlantic equipped with wireless devices. The broadcast was simple: a short spoken introduction, a phonograph selection, a hymn sung and played on violin, a Bible reading of Luke 2:14, and some closing words.² Many historians deem this event the first radio broadcast, the first transmission to an indeterminate audience; however, its artistic ramifications have been ignored. There are few sources for this broadcast, but we have enough information to make two important conclusions – that it was radio art and a simple radio play. No one else has given this broadcast these titles, and I do so only by employing an inclusive methodology to art in this medium. Inclusive definitions of radio art and radio play are needed to appreciate the historical practice and future potential of artistic activity in radio. However some important methodologies of radio art begin with exclusion not inclusion.

Radio Art

A twelve point treatise by Robert Adrian, titled Toward a Definition of Radio Art, is one of the most straight forward attempts to define radio art so far. Adrian starts out broadly: “Radio art is the use of radio as a medium for art.”³ But many of his following eleven points diminish sensitivity to artistic activity in radio. The second point declares that radio art can only happen at the loudspeaker end of radio, and the third denies that sound quality can be a primary artistic

² Helen Fessenden, Fessenden: Builder of Tomorrows (New York: Coward-McCann, 1940), 153.
³ Robert Adrian, Toward a Definition of Radio Art, in Daniel Gilfillan, “Networked Radio Space and Broadcast Simultaneity,” in Re-Inventing Radio; Aspects of Radio as Art, ed. Heidi Grundmann (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2008), 212.
goal. Some of his points are applicable to all radio art, especially those which deal with the inevitable indeterminacy of individual radio experience such as “the radio of every listener determines the sound quality of a radio work,” but as a whole Toward a Definition of Radio Art fails as a comprehensive methodical approach to radio art, especially since it rules out disc jockeying in the process.4

Often radio art is a term reserved only for the work of prominent artists, playwrights, and producers working in radio and is not a conceptual approach toward all radio. Donald McWhinnie’s 1956 book, The Art of Radio, is a prime example. McWhinnie was a formative radio director and producer at the BBC, and his entire book, despite its title, is almost exclusively dedicated to discussing radio drama, radio dramatists, and the production and direction of radio drama. McWhinnie stated that the aim of The Art of Radio was to “define, however loosely, the art of radio.”5 Yet the most concise definition of radio art in this book is part of a short discussion of non-dramatic radio programming. He wrote that he excluded “direct consideration of outside broadcasts, concerts, talks, journalistic documentary programmes, discussions, except in so far as they transcend their basic aim and achieve some kind of artistic synthesis [emphasis mine].”6 Actually, he did exclude consideration of these formats, but admitted that any form of radio programming can be radio art. It merely depends on the critic’s sensitivity to artistic expression.

I suggest the following definition of radio art: radio art is any artistic activity which produces radio sound or affects how radio sound is heard. It may include speaking, writing, and phraseology in radio announcing, sound effect production, voice acting, music programming, studio design and microphony, sound engineering, and even visual and spatial issues such as radio set design and architectural acoustics applied to radio placement. On a large scale, an

4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 12.
entire radio station can be considered a massive, ongoing work of radio art (a century-long radio
symphony) by a legion of artists, and, on a small scale, Guglielmo Marconi’s paint color choice
for his 1896 radio prototype is also radio art – he chose black. Radio artists include inventors
like Lee de Forest, pundits like Rush Limbaugh, radio disc jockeys, and broadcast journalists.

Radio Play

The term radio play could also have a broader definition. I define a radio play as an
isolatable event of radio art in sound created by an artist or group of artists. The definition is
deconstructed this way:

First, a radio play is ‘an isolatable event’ to differentiate it from a radio station or radio
program or series as a whole, both genres of radio art which may be analyzed
aesthetically but are not necessarily in manageable units of time conducive to in depth
acoustic and literary analyses.

Second, a radio play consists of ‘radio art in sound’ because there are elements of radio
art that are not solely sound. This way a radio play can be isolated in a similar way as
that of a symphony or public speech for analysis.

Third and finally, a radio play is ‘created by an artist or group of artists’ to differentiate it
from natural radio phenomenon, like the electromagnetic activity of a solar flare for
instance.

This definition is more liberal than the traditional one. Lance Sieveking, a producer,
director, and writer at the BBC, wrote one of the first studies of radio art, The Stuff of Radio, in
1934. His discussion limits the term ‘radio play’ to radio works with a plot, while all other radio
programs he gives the ambiguous term “feature-programme.” However, he defies his own
definition of a radio play when he labels his own piece, Kaleidoscope; a Rhythm, Representing

---

7 Erik Barnouw, A Tower in Babel; A History of Broadcasting in the United States, To
The physical appearances of radio sets can affect the framework in which radio is heard
and are therefore matters of radio art. Search “radio art” at a library and you will almost
certainly find high on the list Robert Hawes’s Radio Art, a pictorial history of radio set design.
8 As for inventors and technological advancement, many scientific journals, from
Scientific American to Popular Science, from around 1919 on referred to wireless technology as
“the radio art.”
the Life of Man from Cradle to Grave (1928), a radio play. The work was an acoustic montage, containing fractal and often overlapping sections of music, inner monologue, floating dialogue, and poetry, and its plot comes from its subtitle and from external descriptions not from a straightforward storyline. Yet he had no trouble referring to Kaleidoscope as a radio play, despite its experimental acoustic universe and lack of clear internal plot. This is because giving the title radio play was a way to heighten the discourse surrounding Kaleidoscope, not simply to distinguish its genre or even its content.

Another view of radio play is that it is a type of stage play written for radio. But the first thing serious radio art scholars, such as Elissa Guralnick in Sight Unseen, point out is that radio plays are fundamentally different than stage plays. Others relegate the term radio play only to radio drama, narrative radio works that recreate reality in some way with recognizable scenes in sound. Yet many famous radio plays defy this basic definition, like Samuel Beckett’s Cascando, which is an acoustic collage of poetry, monologue, and orchestral music with no traditional plot. There is an argument for only deeming a work a radio play when its author specifically labels it as one, but this definition leaves out too much radio art.

The term feature has become standard outside of America to define special radio programs that do not fit the description of radio drama nicely. John Drakakis writes that the “relatively early division into the categories of radio play and feature, represents in certain respects a distinction without a difference…” Features have less rules than realistic radio drama, anything radio has to offer is up for grabs, including but not limited to dialogue, plot, and scenic realism, and this is the best argument for calling them “radio plays” – especially in critical scholarship – instead of “features.” The German radio artist, Peter Leonhard Braun’s words beautifully reinforce this argument. If we define radio play inclusively then we can substitute the words “radio play” for “feature” in the following quote:

---

10 Ibid., 21-24.
The feature can sing, can dance, it even can strip the information. For me, feature is the art form of information. Its range of possibilities is identical with the range of the medium itself. It is pure radio. Range of subjects – endless. Range of forms – endless. The feature loves radio as an always undiscovered continent, free space and free movement of inspiration and ideas. It lives wildly, it refuses to be defined by the mere content or form of a programme. It understands radio as a chance to match the gifts of a person and a medium. It is an expression of life and abilities.\(^\text{12}\)

Braun’s words nod to the playful potential of radio art composition in structure, form, technique, etc. This artistic breadth and freedom is inherent in the inclusive use of the term “radio play.” “Feature” fails in this respect since it is another term which excludes, i.e. musical programming and much radio drama.

Individual episodes of radio serials, radio newscasts, radio sermons, radio documentaries, and the individual shifts of disc jockeys can be analyzed with the same basic tools as those which scholars historically have used for important works of radio drama, and can be called radio plays with sufficient justification. I do not intend to diminish the importance of the radio play with this broad definition, but rather to elevate and recognize the artistry in all forms of radio programming to enrich the whole area of study. Disc jockeying is one of the most popular and important of twentieth century radio arts. Song selection, ordering, vamping, and fading are important to the listening experience, and undoubtedly the words chosen and how they are spoken between songs are vital to the radio experience.\(^\text{13}\) Also there is a double meaning to “radio play,” as when a recording, usually a piece of music, is played on the radio. In radio the highbrow and lowbrow are thrown in together, and serious discussion of radio art need not be limited only to an elite class of artists or works. The most elaborate radio art constructs can jump to the simplest with the flick of a finger, and we need an analytical vantage that reflects this broad range of artistic endeavor.


\(^{13}\) Tom Stoppard, the famous playwright of stage, screen, and radio, is a blatant disc jockey in his radio play The Real Thing, which is a glorified playlist, a drama built around a collection of desert island song choices.
Norman Corwin’s Radio Art

This discussion naturally leads to Norman Corwin (1910-2011). Most of Corwin’s radio work is referred to as radio drama, but he did not limit himself to conventional radio drama, even struggled with the term. The radio plays with storylines, developed characters, and larger scenic realism that he did compose often wander into fantasy, move to extreme locations, feature nonhuman characters, and used narration techniques to release the action from a specific geographic/temporal scene. The majority of Corwin’s output incorporates radio drama but is not technically radio drama; rather it is in a style he developed out of his experiments creatively presenting poetry on the radio, epitomized in We Hold these Truths (1941) and On a Note of Triumph (1945). The three poetry series Rhymes and Cadences (1934-1935) at WBZA, Poetic License (1937-1938) at WQXR, and Words Without Music (1938-1939) represent the bulk of his total individual works and are where he forged his particular style of radio play. These early works each obtain internal artistic synthesis without using traditional narrative or storytelling techniques. Corwin admitted that what he was “a kind of anthologist” similar to a disc jockey in these early poetry programs. Similarly through his spoken continuity, which involved contemporary commentary, he was a radio journalist, and through including his own poems and pushing the expressive bounds of announcing he was also a radio poet.

Corwin’s most definitive radio works used a collection of techniques from various genres of radio art to celebrate or memorialize an important national or worldwide event. He referred to this as hitting a national “gong,” focusing the ears of the nation on the importance of the moment, and this “gong” analogy is also appropriate because of the quantity and quality of music in his

---

radio plays. His career in radio, which lasted from the mid 1930s to the late 1940s, was marked by a succession of timely ‘radio hits’ that incorporated music in novel ways. *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* (1938), Corwin’s first critically acclaimed radio play, was a response to the bombing of civilians in the Spanish Civil War, the same events which inspired Pablo Picasso’s, *Guerinca*. In it, Corwin weaved a somber and novel musical score out of airplane engine recordings. *We Hold these Truths*, with a grandiose score by Bernard Herrmann and concluded by a performance of the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski, was broadcast on all of the major networks in the USA and helped the country collect itself days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On April 25, 1945, *Word from the People*, with live voices from around the world, announced the creation of the United Nations Charter, and *August 14* (1945), with only Orson Welles’s voice, a handful of sound effects, and a small orchestra, declared that with the help of “God and uranium,” World War II was over.

Even with these notable achievements, many assert that Corwin’s undeniable masterpiece was *On a Note of Triumph*, commemorating the Allied Victory in Europe. After the broadcast, *pro tem* president of CBS, Paul Kesten telegraphed Corwin to congratulate him. Part of Kesten’s message read:

> I deeply believe both [you] and radio touched and maintained a new dimension in your incredible masterpiece. Yet, your touch was so firm and your hand so steady that I know this was no single transcendent creative peak, but merely an augury of the plane to which you have climbed by visible and audible steps over the years. That plane is as wide as it is high, and I envy your mastery of it.\(^{17}\)

*On a Note of Triumph* is an embodiment of eclectic radio artistry and a prime example of the wide ground that the term ‘radio play’ can cover. It featured multiple narrators, the clash of histrionic speeches and simple colloquialisms, a constant ebb and flow of background music, snippets of radio drama scenes, poetic sequences, musical interludes both sung and instrumental,

\(^{16}\) Jerrold Zinnamon, “Norman Corwin; A Study of Selected Radio Plays by the Noted Author and Dramatist” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1984), 364.

and sound effects on demand for any of these other elements. Given this cornucopia of
techniques and its weighty themes (like world peace, universal human rights, and the cost of war)
*On a Note of Triumph* leaves the listener with the impression that a mixture of story, symphony,
newscast, sermon, essay, conversation, ballad, documentary, and poetry have all just occurred.

With the stylistic and technical breadth of Corwin’s radio artistry exemplified in *On a Note of
Triumph* in mind, we come to the first overarching question this thesis poses: What insights into
universal radio art concepts does a study of Corwin’s style give us?

To answer that question this thesis focuses on gaps in Corwin scholarship. Little research
has been done on Corwin’s years of development as a radio artist during his pre-CBS period.
Also his experiments as a composer and musician, which had a formative impact on his radio art,
have never even been so much as mentioned in scholarship to date. Finally, there is also a real
need for aesthetic studies on Corwin that make his radio art and ideas more accessible to the
international dialogue of radio art. There are plenty of studies that excellently approach him as a
patriotic propagandist and as a dramatist in radio and that state his importance in American
cultural history around the War. The predominance of these kinds of studies do well to position
him in American radio history but do little to expose his art and ideas to the thriving radio art
dialogue that exists through academia and communities of contemporary radio art practice.

This thesis directly addresses his stylistic development from his earliest radio projects
until his first original radio plays at CBS. It also highlights his musical activity from early in his
career through the 1940s and shows how his desire to compose dramatically affected his radio art
practice. Throughout this study I attempt to focus on his technical style first and foremost as a
radio artist and on his radio plays as moments of experiential potential rather than reflections of
his larger culture, only touching on his politics when they specifically affect a technique or style.
The vantage of musicology helps to reinforce this focus on style and leads us to the secondary
question this thesis poses, specifically dealing with methodology: What does musicology have to
offer radio art analysis?
Musicology and Radio Art

I began this study of Norman Corwin’s radio work intending to focus on the incidental and featured music in his radio plays. But early in my research, I came across the following passage from Corwin’s radio play, *Anatomy of Sound* (1941), which made me rethink my project:

> Man’s amplifying ear will hear the respiration of the tadpole, count dust-motes as they knock against his pillow in the night, awake in winter to the thud of snowflakes on the roof. The very air, when tranquil, will disclose new harmonies; the clash of kissing lips make towers totter and suspension bridges sway like birches in the wind.18

As I read, and later listened to, these words, I found myself imagining fantastical sounds, hearing them on a different level, as they were being described. I had the realization that describing sounds can incite the sonic imagination, and therefore musical activity in a radio play is not limited to instrumental music and song alone. While a radio play can contain music, it can be musical in more general ways, containing extra-musical elements which strongly affect or incite real-time musical experience. So instead of focusing solely on the music in Corwin’s radio plays, this study attempts a musicological reading of his radio art in general. It approaches the whole radio works with the musical sensitivity often reserved for strictly musical moments.

This thesis is based on the premise that a musicological vantage can enhance traditional literary approaches to radio play analysis. Some scholars have purposefully downplayed musical approaches to radio art analysis; asserting that music does not tell us much about radio since it is less altered by radio than words and other sounds. In *The Stuff of Radio* Sieveking writes,

> There is no such thing as radio music. Composers go on composing music just as if wireless had never been invented, and the music of all periods is played before microphones in exactly the same way as it always has been played. It does not have to be “adapted.”19

Andrew Crissell, in his book *Understanding Radio*, has many insights into ways that music, in combination with words and sounds, functions within radio, yet echoes Sieveking’s words,

---

Apart from the fact that radio allowed the listener to hear music without visual distractions (and even in this was anticipated by the gramophone), the point is that music is rather less revealing about the nature and possibilities of the medium than, say, news, drama or light entertainment: for whereas we can compare radio versions of the latter with their corresponding forms on the stage, screen or in newspapers and see the distinctive way in which the medium has adapted them, music in its essential form is always and everywhere the same. Not modified by radio, it does not particularly illuminate it.20

However, I believe the reverse to be true – music is altered through radio.21 Sieveking’s phrase “played before microphones” is telling: microphones and the control panel are musical instruments when they transmit music just as the human voice or a bell.22 The processes of broadcasting modify musical sound and what context it is heard in, and that difference in how radio mediates music, as opposed to drama, poetry, or journalism, makes musicological approaches essential elements of a well rounded radio art analysis.

Recording technology gives the illusion that music can be scientifically preserved in its essential form, but “recorded live music” is an oxymoron, as the product is different from the original performance whether it is broadcast or not. Loudspeakers, with their magnets and cardboard cones, are magnificently versatile machines, but a far cry from the wood, metal, gut, and human bodies of live music. Theodor Adorno went so far as to antagonistically label a Beethoven symphony played on radio as a “radio symphony,” not a true symphony any longer. “The radio symphony,” Adorno wrote, “is not the live symphony and cannot therefore have the same cultural effect as the live symphony.”23 A song, symphony, or opera on the radio is changed as much as an essay, poem, or book. Radio rips a sound out of its originating space, converts it into electromagnetic waves, then captures and reproduces it on a distant device of

21 Radio has also had an affect on musical composition. Many new forms of music have been created for radio, including radio operas, radio theme songs, and radio drama incidental music. Radio in the twentieth century played an undeniable role in the music industry resulting in popularity charts which reflected and effected taste and their corresponding hit parades (radio programs built from chart lists), and ‘radio songs’ or songs designed for listenability on the radio for commercial interest.
indeterminate quality. If the end result has good enough quality and accompanimental description then the inherent change is less noticeable, but one job of the radio art scholar is to unmask this deception.

Musical activity is everywhere in a radio play, whether it is the timbre, rhythms, and micro-dynamics of the voice; instrumental music or song; or the leap of imagination that happens as we hear and imagine hearing simultaneously. Music and radio art are both made of sound in time and this simple parallel makes them easily comparable – which is what Norman Corwin did:

Let [radio sound], like music, captivate the sense by metaphoric utterance, by mood-stuff and far-ranging concepts. Let it say things in terms of other things, dissolve and modulate and set up new vibrations in the deepest chambers of imagination.24

It is the music-likeness of radio which makes a musicological study of radio plays possible, necessary, and vital.

Methodology: Three Musicological Approaches

The methodology I use is a combination of three approaches to music in radio plays: The first, and most basic, approach is to focus on instrumental music or song. This type of analysis is similar to older methods used to study film music or musical drama, where for purpose of analysis the music is removed from its original dramatic or mixed media context. The music is then analyzed with attention to compositional issues and internal structure, and allows for traditional music theory analysis.

The second approach is to analyze all of the sounds present in a radio play musically. As a result, poetic euphony and alliteration become musical concerns, and melody, rhythm, and tonality can be drawn from any sound sources and larger structural sonic elements, including various voice types, phraseology, and also including music and sound effects. This is similar to analytical methods used for sound poetry and other poetic genres that focus on phonetics as much

24 Norman Corwin, “26 by Corwin 7 September 1941,” 20. This passage from Anatomy of Sound is the source for the title of this thesis.
as meaning, and electroacoustic music, which often uses voices, recorded sounds, and other non-traditional sound sources in musically expressive ways.

The third musicological approach embraces how various levels of meaning interact with, effect, or create moments of musical experience. It can follow the internal semiotics of any sound in a radio play, including music and general musicality as well as words and other sounds. We can find parallels between this approach and studies of opera that are sensitive to the aesthetic and dramatic experience as well as compositional issues. This third approach focuses on the meeting point of the sensual, the musical, and the cognitive listening experience, and is as much about words, ideas, and sound effects as it is about music, which is appropriate since the ultimate goal is to work toward a radio specific analysis.

I employ the three approaches throughout every chapter of this thesis without always drawing attention to them, but some chapters focus on one more than the other two. The chapter “Corwin, Composer” uses the first approach, directly addressing Corwin’s role in the composition and incorporation of music in his radio plays. A handful of his direct compositions are also available for research, and these works are analyzed for the first time in this chapter. The chapter “Nero’s Noël,” uses the second approach. This chapter follows Corwin’s earliest work up to his first original full thirty-minute radio play at CBS, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* (1938). It shows how his style developed through his experiments bringing musical concerns into poetic performance on air, focusing on how Corwin incorporated musical techniques into spoken texts.

These insights to his stylistic developments are doubly important since there remains a paucity of scholarship into Corwin’s pre-CBS radio art. The chapter “Radiogenic Radiophonics: Dissecting the Sound Effect” uses the third approach to address Corwin’s practices and ideas geared toward creating moments of ‘charged radio listening.’ This theoretical chapter attempts to define moments of aesthetically affective radio through Corwin’s sound effect experiments.

While those chapters employ individual approaches, “Continuity and Content; the Innards of Radio,” is dedicated to explaining the three musicological approaches separately.
alongside a more traditional example of literary analysis. Like “Nero’s Noël,” this chapter also provides another much needed study of Corwin’s earliest radio works, and in the process shows that an almost universal conceptual relationship in radio art practice – the continuity and content dynamic or the relationship between framing and featured elements – is a formative dichotomy Corwin played upon to develop his mature radio play style. This style is first heard substantially in his second original half hour radio play, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*, which is the subject of the chapter.

**Literature Review**

There are many stellar examples of literary radio play analysis, but few examples for this study to imitate, which incorporate musical or sound specific analysis alongside text/word analyses. Since the most famous radio playwrights have been literary men and women, like Dylan Thomas, Harold Pinter, Thomas Stoppard, and Angela Carter, analytical methods have emphasized literary methods. Marjorie Perloff’s “The Silence that is not Silence; Acoustic Art in Samuel Beckett’s ‘Embers’” is an exception as it employs an analysis sensitive to sound, silence, and deep listening as well as words and plot. In this essay, Perloff also attempts to define plausible reactions to specific voice and sound effect sequences. Critical tools for dealing with sound like those used in this essay are needed to round out literary and sociological ones to help create a more complete radio play analysis.

There has been only one musicological study of the music of Corwin’s radio plays as far as I know, a chapter in the 2000 dissertation, “Bernard Herrmann’s Radio Music for the ‘Columbia Workshop,’” by Robert Kosovsky. Kosovsky spends a chapter focusing on Herrmann’s interpretations and creative reactions to many of Corwin’s radio scripts. Kosovsky’s

---

work is an excellent example of the first musicological approach defined above, which isolates and analyzes moments of traditional music, but he also employs the second approach, detailing how Herrmann’s radio scores blended into the general musicality of radio scripts and the third approach explaining how the composer pressed the boarders of diegetic music and synthesized sound effects into his music in Corwin radio plays.

Two lengthy studies of Samuel Beckett’s radio plays directly address music and the radio play, Stefan-Brook Grant’s “Samuel Beckett’s Radio Plays: Music of the Absurd” and Kevin Branigan’s Radio Becket: Musicality in the Radio Plays of Samuel Beckett. Both works show how sensitivity to musical expression and sound design can enhance literary analyses of radio plays. Although neither Grant nor Branigan differentiate the three musicological approaches, as I have done, these divisions are noticeable in each work. Both follow Beckett’s lead in Words and Music and Cascando, radio plays with substantial musical scores, focusing specifically on the music or the function and expressivity of instrumental music. They also analyze Beckett’s All That Fall with special emphasis to sound effects and broader ideas of musicality. And the third approach is observable in their treatments of Embers, since this radio play engenders sensitivity to the interplay between silence, sounds, and semantics.

Although there have been no substantial musicological studies on Corwin, there have been nine theses and dissertations specifically focused on his radio art and recently a chapter in Neil Verma’s dissertation, later published as Theater of the Mind; Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama. Verma’s book is a cultural study of collective aesthetics and style in

---


28 Below is a list of theses and dissertations on Corwin listed chronologically with brief annotation:

Rhoda Mabel Hunter, “The Application of the Structural Principles of Advertising in the Documentary Dramas of Norman Corwin” (Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1949). As its title suggests this thesis compares Corwin’s attempt to convince in his radio plays to commonly used advertisement techniques. Hunter also addresses how Corwin may have influenced contemporary advertisements.
Raphael Herman Block, “The Viewless Theater: The Patriotic and Political Radio Plays of Four American Dramatists” (Thesis, Miami University, 1962). This is an extended essay which surveys the careers of Arch Oboler, Corwin, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Archibald MacLiesh with an attention to form and structure in their war themed radio plays. The section on Corwin does not include substantial analysis of any specific works.

Stephan Clarke, “An Analysis of Six World War II Radio Dramas by Norman Corwin” (Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1968). A literary analysis of We Hold these Truths, Cromer, Savage Encounter, Untitled, On a Note of Triumph, and 14 August with special attention to their roles as propaganda. Clarke traces tropes and themes in Corwin’s work such as the common man, personalization of democracy, political polemics, and intelligent anger.


Vera Simpson, “A Study of Selected Radio Plays by Norman Corwin for Adaptation to Readers Theatre” (Thesis, Wayne State University, 1973). This thesis gives a survey of Corwin’s career in network radio and an explanation of reader’s theater, a term covering verse choir and staged and unstaged group readings of plays. She compares and contrasts radio drama and readers theater performance practices and adapts four Corwin radio plays for alternate performance styles.

Jon Boone, “Norman Corwin: Literary Propagandist for the Common Man; an Annotated Bibliography” (Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1977). This is the most comprehensive attempt to collect all of Corwin’s articles, books, and other publications up to 1977. Boone also catalogues articles about Corwin and reviews of his works, and features a biography of Corwin’s life up to 1977 using only published print sources.

Mary McGann, “Voices from the Dark: A Study of the Radio Achievement of Norman Corwin, Archibald MacLeish, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas and Samuel Beckett” (Thesis, Indiana University, 1979). This work is a comparative study of form in radio drama. McGann uses literary analysis and focuses on Corwin as a radio writer focused on social themes of vast public interest as opposed to MacLeish as a poet, MacNeice and Thomas as storytellers, and Beckett as a writer who pioneered the consciousness through radio art.


early American radio plays. He analyzes levels of scenic realism in Corwin’s *We Hold these Truths* to exemplify extreme trends in radio drama composition, and his study is a significant step toward comparative studies of early American radio plays.

Among academic scholarship on Corwin, Jerrold Zinnamon’s “Norman Corwin: A Study of Selected Radio Plays by the Noted Author and Dramatist” is the most comprehensive. As a fourteen year old, Zinnamon had the honor of viewing the historical broadcast of *On a Note of Triumph*. His fascination with Corwin at an early age led to his dedicated scholarship later in life. His dissertation consists of nearly fifty analyses of Corwin’s works, focusing on historical setting, dramatic techniques, and the function of sound and music. However, his primary sources were limited to Corwin’s published radio plays, books, and articles, personal interviews with Corwin, and a limited number of recorded radio plays. Since 1984, an enormous amount of additional primary source material has become available for research, significantly enhancing any attempt at scholarship.

For instance, in 1986 R. LeRoy Bannerman published an authoritative biography and history of Corwin’s radio career, *Norman Corwin and Radio: the Golden Years*. A decade later, two primary source publications were also released: *Norman Corwin’s Letters*, a vast compendium of letters neatly edited and organized, and *Years of the Electric Ear*, a three hundred page published interview with historian Douglas Bell, which shines light on many aspects of Corwin’s career and art. The acquisition and cataloguing of the Norman Corwin Collection at the American Radio Archives in Thousand Oaks Public Library, a relatively new resource, has made Thousand Oaks, California the Mecca for Corwin studies. For my research, I drew from the Norman Corwin Collection scripts, rare recordings, and documents pertaining to the most

---

neglected area of research in Corwin’s career, his earliest radio projects. But out of all these new primary sources, none is as important as audio digitization. Nearly all of Corwin’s radio plays from 1939 on have been converted into digital format. Whereas these precious recordings (some trapped on brittle glass discs) were once only found in private collections or in archives, today they are readily accessible through online archives and dealers.

Previous Corwin scholarship has not only lacked these important resources, but also methodological approaches commonly used today. Some of the best analytical scholarship of radio drama resides in the British anthologies Radio Drama edited by Peter Lewis and British Radio Drama edited by John Drakakis.\(^{32}\) Likewise, Elissa Guralnick’s Sight Unseen is now a standard in literary analysis of radio plays.\(^ {33}\) Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933 by Margaret Fisher is one of the only published studies addressing radio operas and one of the most insightful surveys of European early radio drama and experimental radio art.\(^ {34}\) Timothy Crook and Andrew Crissell have consistently raised the standard of academic radio particularly in Crook’s International Radio Journalism and Radio Drama: Theory and Practice which are histories, studies in aesthetics, practical production guides, and personal narratives all at the same time, and Crissell’s seminal textbook Understanding Radio and the anthology Radio, a mammoth three volume series containing articles covering theory, genres, history, audience research, sociology, and technology.\(^ {35}\)

Other important works that have been influential to this study include Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde, edited by Douglas Kahn and Gregory

Whitehead; *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission*, edited by Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander; *Phantasmic Radio* by Allen S. Weiss; *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* by Douglas Kahn; and *Re-Inventing Radio: Aspects of Radio as Art*, a collection of essays published by the Kunstradio organization in Austria. These books and collections of essays analyze radio plays and radio art through avant-garde theories and avant-garde art and through contemplations of the aesthetic, cultural, and psychological implications of radio technology.

However, these scholars almost entirely avoid American radio from the 1930s through the 1950s. There is the token reference to Orson Welles’s Martian invasion, but other than that famous bit of nostalgia, they ignore historical American radio art. Only in *Radiotext(e)*, an anthology of radio scripts and essays edited by Neil Strauss, is there an effort to position early American radio plays next to international and modern radio art. Despite the ambiguity towards the American milieu Corwin worked in, this new scholarship has much to offer a study of his radio art.

**Outline of Following Chapters**

The following four chapters contain the first substantial studies of Corwin’s development as a radio artist, his compositional activity, and his aesthetics of radio sound. “Nero’s Noël” is a narrative which follows the dynamic of poetics and musicality in his style from his earliest known radio work to his first thirty minute original radio play, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*.

“Continuity and Content: The Innards of Radio” is partly a narrative and partly a study in

---


38 This consists of a cover design which features Welles dressed up as the Shadow and a truncated transcript of Corwin’s radio play *Seems Radio is Here to Stay.*
comparative methodologies, and directly addresses the question, ‘what does musicology have to offer radio art analysis?’ It follows the formative relationship between framing and featured elements from Corwin’s earliest radio works to his second half hour original radio play, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*. After this I give analytical examples of the three musicological approaches I use. Next, “Corwin, Composer and Collaborator” addresses the neglected area of Corwin’s musical composition before and during his radio career with biographical material, descriptions of his compositional techniques, and analyses of his most important compositions. The penultimate chapter of this thesis, “Radiogenic Radiophonics: Dissecting the Sound Effect,” provides new insights into Corwin’s essential ideals and theories about radio as a sound art. It looks deeply into Corwin’s conception of the sound effect event as a microcosm of common radio art phenomena. The Conclusion will address the central questions of this study in the light of the entire thesis as well as addressing Corwin’s legacy in the international study of radio art.
“Poetry is a form of expression better adapted to radio broadcasting than anything else besides music.”  

Norman Corwin made this declaration only two months into his first radio series, *Rhymes and Cadences*, foreshadowing the basic tenants that guided his development as a radio artist. To him radio art had a high potential, and he idealized the most elemental fact about broadcast radio art – that it is built of sonics and semantics. He believed that poetry and music were similar arts, sound arts with properties far from anything else when mediated by radio.  

Expounding on this thought, Corwin wrote in 1937 that poetry was, “an intimate art, like music – something to be spoken in the home as you sing, or play a piano – something as warm and as familiar as the music to which it is most closely related.”  

His first series, *Rhymes and Cadences*, along with the following series *Poetic License* and *Words without Music*, are built on the idea that not only can music and poetry be faithfully adapted to radio but their essences or moods can also be transmitted into a new medium. Conscious experimentation with the relationship of poetry and music, conceptually and actually, is the narrative of Corwin’s early stylistic development.  

Scholars traditionally have ignored the entire pre-CBS period of Corwin’s career or simply summed it up in a few pages, paragraphs, or words. This is because of his meteoric rise to national prominence so soon after he began at CBS in April of 1938. By July, he was directing CBS’s flagship program, *Columbia Workshop*. By November, had his own series. And at Christmas he broadcast his first half hour radio drama, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*. Months later, he was a nationally discussed figure in radio. John Dunning, the American radio historian,  

---  

39 *Microphone*, 26 May 1934, 3.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Norman Corwin, “Amherst Carves New Slice of Fame as She Creates a Poetry-Speaking Town,” *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, 1 August 1937, 3E.
noted, “So swift was his rise, once it began, that he seemed to burst upon the scene a complete, polished, and original talent.” Les Guthman made Corwin’s origins legendary in the documentary Corwin (1996) when two minutes into the film, science fiction writer Ray Bradbury suggested that Corwin had been taught to write by William Shakespeare and Walt Whitman. But if we trace Corwin’s early career there are clear stages of technical development, formative influences, and a noticeable growth of his confidence as a radio artist. This chapter ends where most narratives about Corwin begin, with his first full length original radio play at CBS, The Plot to Overthrow Christmas. At each stage of Corwin’s progress he experiments with a new relationship between poetry and music, until finally he finds the balance that would be a cornerstone of his mature style.

At seventeen, straight out of high school and instead of going to college, Corwin started a job as a reporter at the Greenfield, Massachusetts, Recorder. Two years later, in 1929, Corwin became the newscaster and the radio editor for the Springfield Republican in Springfield, Massachusetts. As a newscaster, his job was to rewrite news dispatches into radio bulletins and then read them over the air on WBZA and its Boston simulcast WBZ. This process “had a great deal to do with the evolution of my theories of writing for the ear instead of the eye,” he later said, and during this time he began “developing a definite sense of cadence” on the radio. As the Springfield Republican’s radio editor, he also wrote daily guides and schedules to help radio listeners navigate the airwaves and ran a weekly column about radio. Radio criticism was part of his job, and he began to have strong opinions about the content and delivery of poetry readings, a

---

43 Corwin, Les Guthman, 80 min., University of Southern California, School of Journalism, 1996. videocassette.
44 Journalism nursed his burgeoning curiosity and became its own kind liberal arts education for him, establishing an open pursuit of knowledge that he would later describe as “catholic, widespread,” and “buckshot.” R. LeRoy Bannerman, Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 9.
45 Norman Corwin, CBS Radio Spotlight, American Radio Archives, Norman Corwin Collection C-2, 12 May 1940. compact disc.
“radio staple” of the early 1930s, haphazardly juxtaposed with electric organ music.\textsuperscript{46} This was an affront to his ideal of radio art, which he increasingly identified as his own personal calling. In a \textit{Springfield Republican} article he wrote:

> For years now certain poets, writing for the daily press or for periodicals, have been pumping up verse no more esthetic than chewing gum. For years too, radio bards have been twittering undistinguished poetry full of silver linings and hearty smacks-on-the-back, (the species of poem which argues that if you’ve broken a leg you should be very grateful you didn’t break two, and that if you’ve got plenty of nothing, why nothing’s plenty for you.) Some of these radio minnesingers have served elaborate specimens of the banana royal category of verse – poems performed in a velvety baritone, andante cantabile, and assisted by muted strings of an organ, playing the mellowest of Chopin or Debussy.\textsuperscript{47}

Corwin later provided scathing parodies of this style of poetry presentation in his radio play \textit{Radio Primer} (1941). One mock poem is supposedly by a poet who has the gall to bury himself in a time capsule along with a poem, titled “Wings over Everything,” to be opened and read in 2941. The poem begins:

\begin{quote}
If you broke a leg this morning, do not mind;  
You could have broken two or gone stone blind.  
If your skull was badly fractured, do not fret – […]\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

This reoccurring mockery, well into his network career, tells us how deeply formative this particular annoyance was. Another section of \textit{Radio Primer} designates poetry on the radio, as well as the performers, as sleep aids. “The best soporifics,” the narrator explains, “have voices deeper even than narrators, mainly because they feel the world more keenly.”\textsuperscript{49} Alliteration and an obscure collection of words litter the following parody and provide a ridiculous contrast to the deep voice and somber tone of the reader. The whole ordeal is backed by a “lush, even overripe accompaniment,” on the electric organ:

\begin{quote}
SOPORIFIC: When Phoebe doth her grummons gather up
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Norman Corwin, “Amherst Carves New Slice of Fame as She Creates a Poetry-Speaking Town,” \textit{Springfield Sunday Union and Republican}, 1 August 1937, 3E.  
\textsuperscript{48} Norman Corwin, \textit{Thirteen by Corwin} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 36.  
\textsuperscript{49} Norman Corwin, \textit{Thirteen by Corwin} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 42.
And in the trancid night forsoonly sup  
Of myrrh and the smerds of Arcady,  
When chumblers in the dim-lit aspenade  
Bestrew the glamorantine of the glade,  
Then come, love, cast thy wampts and cherybdibs  
And frolls and fulsome friptures on the air,  
For hearts that beat in wambledon garoome  
Can ne’er the druid fluid frume the flume.\(^{50}\)

Corwin had a certain amount of respect at WBZA as a chief news correspondent, and in 1934 he asked for his own show. His pitch to WBZA states that this show would expressly “avoid the homely philosophical type of poetry currently popular.”\(^{51}\) The station liked the idea and granted Corwin a fifteen-minute weekly poetry and music program which he called Rhymes and Cadences. The series’s idea was simple. Corwin selected and read poetry and pianist Benjamin Kalman selected and performed piano music after each poem. For a year, starting in the spring of 1934, Corwin and Kalman broadcast around fifty episodes of Rhymes and Cadences.\(^{52}\)

A press release for the series’s premiere stated that “the program, developed by Norman Corwin, is designed to introduce the best contemporary poets to a radio audience that has had little opportunity to hear higher verse.”\(^{53}\) The first episode featured the poems “The Rich Man” and “Ad Xanthiam Phoceum” by Franklin P. Adams, “Epitaph on a Commonplace Person Who Died in Bed” by Amy Levy, “Aftermath” by Siegfried Sassoon, and “I am Aladdin” by Robert Carlton Brown – a fair balance of lighthearted wit and romance (Adams and Brown) and somber reflections on death and war (Levy and Sassoon). For the last poem, Corwin intended to read David Morton’s sonnet “Old Ships.” He went so far as to type it into the list he used as a script.

---

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 43.


\(^{52}\) Corwin was not paid to produce Rhymes and Cadences, beginning a pattern that gave him extreme freedom to create radio art that interested him but never led to great material wealth. Although he would later work in network radio which was fuelled by advertisements and artistic compromise for the sake of the commercial Corwin remained outside of this cycle. He was not in it for the money.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
But gathering his courage right before the show went on the air, he crossed out Morton’s poem and penciled in his own poem, “Ocean Symphony” – making the conscious choice to position himself next to these other successful poets.

During the show’s run, Corwin also arranged for local poets to read on *Rhymes and Cadences*, including David Morton, Frank Prentice Rand, Wilbert Snow, Roberta Swartz Chalmers, Elspeth MacDuffie O’Halleran, and John Theobald, giving him the opportunity to hear how authors conceived their own works in sound. In one letter to Morton in 1938, Corwin explained part of his ideas concerning poetry read aloud: “If all the poets who are only so-so readers could be made into good or even fair readers, we’d be doing something.”

According to Corwin, Morton and Carl Sandburg were poets who’s speaking measured up to their writing, but he wondered if he would be wrong to suggest that Robert Frost “be coached on the interpretation of his own poems.”

*Rhymes and Cadences* had a musical aim as well as a poetic one. In relation to this contemporaries Corwin felt that he depended heavier on music. This reliance on music began with *Rhymes and Cadences*’s experiments in comparative moods. The piano music was meant to reinforce the poem’s atmosphere. According to Corwin and Kalman, music and poetry recitals of the day included poems that matched the mood of the music, but in this series “the music sustain[ed] the mood of the poem.” The original script reveals that Corwin had first intended for Kalman to perform an introductory theme song, part of “La cathédrale engloutie” by Claude Debussy, and Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in G-sharp Minor in its entirety. But sometime after the script was typed and before the show broadcast, Corwin decided on the alternating format. He penciled in the generic suggestion “blues” and twice simply “Brahms,” perhaps having an understanding with Kalman. He also specified Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* to

---

55 Ibid., 36.
56 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
57 *Microphone*, 26 May 1934, 3.
follow Brown’s “I am Aladdin.” With this move Corwin took more control over the final program and began to cue music.

Alternating music and poetry without juxtaposing the two was a reaction to the organ-poetry amalgams he abhorred. “I thought the listener has work enough cut out to appreciate the words and music separately,” he later said. Freely mixing music and words became a common aspect of Corwin’s later style, but in Rhymes and Cadences these two basic elements created their combined affect without overlapping. It was not until he had been producing, directing, and writing programs for nearly a year at CBS that he finally began to include standard incidental music in his radio plays, but in his earliest pre-network projects he danced around blatant juxtaposition to find alternative combinations of poetry and music.

In 1936, Corwin moved to New York City and began work at 20th Century Fox as a radio publicist. Like his job at The Springfield Republican, converting print to radio copy, or “radioese,” was part of his job. He also wrote radio blurbs about current Fox films for radio stations throughout the country to read on air. WQXR on Long Island had a reputation for fine art music and intellectualism, so while working for Fox Corwin decided to pitch another poetry program at WQXR. The station accepted his second series Poetic License, and it ran from June 1937, to April, 1938, for over forty episodes. For the most part Poetic License abandoned the musical performances of Rhymes and Cadences. However, for two episodes of Poetic

---


59 The March, 5 1939 episode of Words without Music titled “Leaves of Grass” has music cues realized by composer/conductor Charles Paul. The written cues by Corwin must have been coordinated with Paul since many consist of one word, such as “Passage,” “Fanfare,” or “Organ.” These are not the first instances of music in Corwin’s CBS radio series, rather they are the first example of him writing non-diegetic music into his programs under the cue title “MUSIC” for another composer to realize.


61 “Norman Corwin with Peggy Burt ‘Poetic License,’” Variety, 26 January 1938.
License, Corwin invited pianists to perform short pieces he had composed himself. These pieces were positioned in the same way as music in the earlier series, yet went beyond by being original tone poems. This music was a safe distance from the style of radio music he initially avoided: it was for piano not organ, performed after not during the reading, and was intelligently composed with the poems in mind, instead of being ad hoc accompaniment. Corwin was much more invested in the original compositions of Poetic License than the music of Rhymes and Cadences, which may have been why there was so little instrumental music in Poetic License – it took too much energy and time for him to compose.

Since he could not rely on quantities of music he needed more content to fill the fifteen-minute length of each Poetic License episode. Corwin used this space as an opportunity to expand his portfolio of thematic techniques. In one episode, Corwin featured recordings of both Sandburg and Frost reading their own poetry. He built other shows around themes like inebriation, war, biblical poetry, and poets who were killed. Two episodes labeled “Portrait Galleries” explored the art of poetic portraiture from several different angles. He also dedicated shows to single authors, such as Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Sarah Teasdale, and D. H. Lawrence.

The August 2, 1937 episode of Poetic License, “Variations on Mary had a Little Lamb,” (referred to by Corwin simply as Mary) is the most lasting radio work Corwin produced in the entire series. Mary was a groundbreaking radio play in Corwin’s career. It was his first radio drama, a designation usually given to the later Plot to Overthrow Christmas. It was his network debut when a later incarnation, which included many changes from the original WQXR version, aired on NBC’s variety show The Magic Key of RCA. And the NBC broadcast of Mary is the earliest extant audio recording of Norman Corwin’s radio art. Not until he worked at CBS did

---

62 The episodes of Poetic License with piano music were 13 October 1937 and 13 April 1938. The pieces were musical responses to Arturo Giovannitti’s “The Walker” and James Weldon Johnson’s “Go Down Death.” The first piece has no extant score or recording, but a later version of Corwin’s music on “Go Down Death” was recorded and is analyzed in the chapter of this thesis, “Corwin, Composer.”
Corwin archive complete scripts. This pre-CBS recording is therefore the most complete
document for study of a radio work from this period in Corwin’s career.

Mary was a multi-voiced arrangement, and this technique was the most important step in
Corwin’s stylistic development in Poetic License. “Variations on Mary had a Little Lamb” is, as
the musical genre implies, in sections and in each section Corwin and actress Peggy Burt voiced a
different set of characters. The NBC version of Mary, which is what I will discuss here,
featured an introductory narrator, sound effects, and orchestra. The first of the six variations
mocks the March of Time, a popular radio series that dramatized world news events. In Corwin’s
parody, the media makes the lamb’s persistence into an important news story. A reporter rattles
off: “news-hawks, quick to gather at the scene, question the pretty, pert, petulant lass.” Next we
hear a policeman, “calling all cars, be on the look out for Mary, M-A-R-Y … she is being
followed by a lamb, L-A-M-B.” A subdued newspaper article by a “super-cautious, ultra-
conservative daily newspaper,” follows:

63 One section of the original was in the style of an epitaph from Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology. This variation was removed from the NBC broadcast of Mary, but shows how influential Master’s work was on Corwin. Perhaps even the idea of poetic variation in Mary came from the famous poetic anthology.

Later blatant influences also exist. Anne Rutledge’s epitaph in Spoon River Anthology and Corwin’s radio play Anne Rutledge (1941) have similarities beyond merely the choice of content. Both treatments portray President Lincoln’s first love, Rutledge, with music. Masters’s poem begins, “Out of me unworthy and unknown/ The vibrations of deathless music,” and Corwin’s play begins with a girl humming and the words, “let me tell you about the girl humming that tune.” Corwin also produced a radio adaptation of Spoon River Anthology in his first series at CBS. Masters was present at the broadcast and was moved to tears. According to Bannerman, Masters explained that his reaction had been to “the voices of the cast.” The voices were similar to the actual people on whom Masters had based his poems.

64 Apparently, Corwin had a professional director for the NBC Mary, who most likely had final responsibility for the sound and music cues in the script. The sound of this break-neck speed production is at a professional level that Corwin only achieved some time later.

65 Norman Corwin and Peggy Burt, Magic Key of RCA, American Radio Archives tape C-2, 13 March 1938. compact disc.

66 Norman Corwin and Peggy Burt, Magic Key of RCA, American Radio Archives tape C-2, 13 March 1938. compact disc.
It was learned from usually reliable sources at a late hour last night that the girl, alleged to be receiving the attentions of what impartial observers were reportedly unanimous in believing was an ordinary lamb, is known by the name of Mary.\textsuperscript{67}

Then a straightforward scene of radio drama is heard when Gertrude Lawrence talks on the phone to Noel Coward. Lawrence flamboyantly presents “Mary had a Little Lamb” as the possible plot of a new play for Coward. Then two scriptwriters discuss turning the nursery rhyme into a full length film with Busby Berkeley-like dance numbers.

The final scene, true in its virtuosity to the typical climax of variations on a theme, is a duet featuring Corwin and Burt as two surrealist poets. The poem for two voices displays Corwin’s boldness as a radio writer. (He may have meant it to be an example of his own poetic tenacity since he refers to himself in the introduction to \textit{Mary} as “one of our better known young poets.”\textsuperscript{68}) In the following transcript of the dialogue note the constant alternation of voices which allowed for the breathless pace of this final variation. This tempo allows the listeners little time to digest the barrage of humor until the final short punch line Burt delivers:

\begin{quote}
Corwin: Is there any any is there nonesuch no one on some boa brooch a bray a brace lace so catch a key to keep back Mary’s lamb keep back Mary’s lamb from following all the way following all the way; so the Gertrude Stein

Burt: Yes, Gatsby coming, and lots of which it is not as soon as it.

Corwin: Worse, eighteen point six.

Burt: No speaks thee thirteen.

Corwin: How brought now?

Burt: Thunder head cow folly.

Corwin: Slangin’ gnat slapper.

Burt: Ruby pig widgeon

Corwin: However whereas and withal
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} Norman Corwin and Peggy Burt, \textit{Magic Key of RCA}, American Radio Archives tape C-2, 13 March 1938. compact disc.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
Burt: As herein before provided

Corwin: If, but, and be it resolved that one, Mary

Burt: Two, the lamb, but you are still evading the issue:
When is the next train to New Zealand?

Corwin: This I cannot tell you, for that your name is Mary, and for that you are 
lamb-followed!

Burt: Oh ho, ah ha, I begin to understand.

Corwin: You must grasp the overtones and the undertones and the side tones and 
the bottom tones and the inside out tones and never-the-which-however 
tones

Burt: Are you following the script, Iago?

Corwin: Are you following your lamb, Mary?

Burt: So, where is the nearest exit?

Corwin: Around and about, above and below, thick and fast.

Burt: They will never guess the meaning, it is later than they think ha-ho!

Corwin: Hank Greenburg lives in the Bronx but plays for Detroit.

Burt: Don’t evade the issue.

Corwin: What have you to say before you die?

Burt: Baaaaah.  

Corwin’s lyric virtuosity in this final variation was directly suited to radio, with immediate 
sonorous and semantic effects. During a radio interview with Corwin, John T. McManus noted 
this feature: “Yeah you told me one time that it didn’t matter to you how your stuff looked in 
print as long as it was listenable.” In this final variation of Mary we hear Corwin’s music 
experimentation seeping through. The word phrases, some nearly sung, demarcate rhythms of

---

69 Norman Corwin and Peggy Burt, *Magic Key of RCA*, American Radio Archives, 
Norman Corwin Collection C-2, 13 March 1938. compact disc.

Collection C-2, 12 May 1940. compact disc.
2/4, 3/4, or 4/4, and these fluidly shifting meters together with the alternating male and female timbres achieve a primitive and listenable musical construction.

Among Corwin’s pre-CBS radio works, *Mary* is the most creative and original example of his radio artistry. *Mary* was a radio play, a short one, but in radio where all the hard work is funneled into the microphone and dissipates into air, a radio play, publicized and recorded, is something solid. It still stands after the broadcast. *Mary* was a big step for Corwin, but in *Poetic License* one more episode foreshadowed his next stage of experimentation with words and music.

On November 17, 1937, Corwin arranged the poems “Hospital” by Stephen Vincent Benet, “Song Tournament: New Style” by Louis Untermeyer, “Killers” by Carl Sandburg, “Jesse James” by William Rose Benet, and “Anthology of Oom” by Isidore Schneider for a group of performers. The multi-voice arrangements of these poems are lost, but in the surviving introduction to the episode, Corwin explained how he modified poems for radio. He wrote:

> In arranging (or orchestrating) these poems, I have taken certain liberties with the original texts, adding or cutting words and phrases wherever I felt that such scoring would benefit the radio version of the poem.⁷¹

There is no extant recording or script for this episode, but it is a basic description of the majority of his next series, *Words without Music*, at CBS.

In May of 1938, due to *Poetic License*’s success, especially the publicity from NBC’s *The Magic Key of RCA* featuring *Mary*, and introductions to CBS executives arranged by his brother Emil, Corwin was hired at CBS and began training to be a director and producer. Before he was given his own show, which was the plan, he began directing and co-directing radio programs.⁷² He directed a handful of shows including episodes of the educational daily series *American School of the Air*, the soap opera *County Seat*, and the documentary series *Americans at

---

⁷² *Current Biography* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1940), 197.
Work and Living History. This period was Corwin’s first real experience with the console and organizing a large staff.\textsuperscript{73}

Apparently, Corwin freely experimented while directing. Gilbert Seldes, who produced Americans at Work at the same time that Corwin was directing the show had some criticisms. Corwin recounts, “there were some earnest but always friendly arguments…mainly about what he considered my too free use of sound.”\textsuperscript{74} Many radio writers cautioned against experimenting with sounds and sound effects. Arch Oboler wrote with picturesque harshness that radio drama had been wearing “undersized three-cornered pants” too long, slowing development because writers focused on techniques such as montages, “symbolic musical effects,” and “sensational sound effects,” instead of on good story writing.\textsuperscript{75} Luckily, Corwin ignored criticisms like those of Seldes and Oboler.

After directing at CBS for six months, Corwin went to see William B. Lewis with an idea for a new program, and for the third time proposed a series based on poetry.\textsuperscript{76} Lewis agreed to give Corwin some latitude and so Corwin hired a cast and produced a pilot episode. It was a resounding success. Norman Corwin’s Words without Music, as Lewis titled the show, entirely abandoned the simple reading of poetry of Rhymes and Cadence and Poetic License.\textsuperscript{77} Instead, he would apply a variety of methods toward poem adaptation, including sound effect enhancements, multi-voice arrangements, dramatizations, musical accompaniments, and original radio poems composed by Corwin for the series. Words without Music was Corwin’s first program with a budget and access to professional radio personnel, and this half-hour show

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{73} Norman Corwin, “Years of the Electric Ear,” interview by Douglas Bell (Metuchen and London: Directors Guild of America & Scarecrow Press, 1994), 21.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Michael G. Kammen, The Lively Arts; Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 258.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Arch Oboler, Fourteen Radio Plays (New York: Random House, 1940), xvi.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Norman Corwin, “Years of the Electric Ear,” interview by Douglas Bell (Metuchen and London: Directors Guild of America & Scarecrow Press, 1994), 30.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Perhaps the title, Words without Music, was an allusion to Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn’s collections of lyrical piano pieces, Lieder ohne Worte (Songs without Words). This type of elemental titling was also used by Samuel Beckett in his radio play Words and Music (1961).
\end{itemize}
allowed him more freedom than ever to let his imagination take flight. His audience also increased from the hundreds of thousands that perhaps heard his local show on WQXR, to millions that were standard for any national CBS program.

*Words without Music* included many original radio poems and two new half-hour radio plays, but the majority of the series adapted and presented the works of others. Corwin still considered himself a “frank propagandist for poetry,” but his method of presenting poetry was so extreme that it needed explaining.\(^{78}\) The pilot program, provisionally titled like his WQXR series *Poetic License*, aired on November 3, 1938, and its introduction reads:

> The Workshop offers a new treatment of the old art of poetry, a technique of orchestration and augmentation created expressly for radio. This technique adapts for the enjoyment of the ear poems written originally for the eye, and in doing so full use is made of the freedom implicit in the title *Poetic License*.\(^{79}\)

Corwin took poetry adaptation to a new level and shifted his focus to innovative presentation rather than faithful transmission of a printed poem. The second broadcast of the pilot episode aired on December 4, 1938, this time live and with its new title, *Norman Corwin’s Words without Music*. This second version had many changes, and Corwin was put in the position to defend the musicality of his program because of its title. The new introduction reflects this conflict; to compensate he even replaced the word “poetry” with the word “Song” in the first line:

> Columbia offers a different treatment of the very old art of Song – *Words without Music*. This experimental program is based on the theory that words, when arranged in the right way, are music in themselves; and to support this theory Norman Corwin has taken a number of poems and applied them to the special uses of radio through the combined techniques of orchestration and augmentation.\(^{80}\)

It is clear from this statement that Corwin did not wish to capitulate to the title’s implication – a title that he did not choose. Instead he went deeper theoretically and practically into radio art that existed simultaneously as music and poetry.

---


\(^{79}\) Norman Corwin, *Poetic License*, Haendiges 89730A, 3 November 1938, cassette.

Corwin’s use of the terms orchestration and augmentation in both introductions refer to pseudo-musical techniques which manipulated timbre, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and general pitch range. Corwin “orchestrated” poems by assigning multiple voices where characters or narrative streams were present, by specifying gender and tonal range for effect, or by layering of voices. As an example, consider Corwin’s setting of Walt Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” a prime example of what Glenn Gould, the pianist, composer, and radio artist, called “radio counterpoint.” The setting begins with the voice of an astronomer speaking in dense technical terminology. This jargon fades to a low volume and underpins Whitman’s short poem and disappears completely as the poem reaches its final lines. The differing syntaxes make the counterpoint poetic as well as musical in timbre and rhythm.

“Augmentation” seems to refer to the lengthening of a poem for effect whether through the repetition of a word or words, through tempo alterations, through the addition of sound effects or, as in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” through the addition of extra-poetical text.

The ending of Corwin’s adaptation of “The Machine, Yes,” by Carl Sandburg, uses augmentation through repetition and slowing of tempo. The stanza in question reads:

a machine needs
is a little regular attention
and plenty of grease
and plenty of grease
and plenty of grease
and plenty of grease, grease

This setting of “The Machine, Yes” also displays the beginning of Corwin’s sound effect technique. Going beyond the proverbial horse hooves and train sounds used elsewhere in this episode, “The Machine, Yes” has a rhythmic sound cue underscoring simply referred to as

---

“MACHINE EFFECT” that “SLOWS DOWN AND STOPS,” along with the text “p l e n t y  o o 
g r e a s e.”

This slowing of the text along with the other vocal techniques Corwin employed in this series were essentially borrowed from a contemporary movement of poetry performance art called verse choir. The movement originated as an educational method in the United Kingdom in the 1920s, but soon became popular in America, and was practiced throughout the country in grade schools, high schools, and colleges. At its simplest, verse choir involved group recitation of a poem in unison, but more complex forms abounded. Techniques included multiple choir antiphony, grouping by gender and vocal range, soloists, duos, and other pairings. Varying dynamics and timbre contrasts were used for dramatics.

Corwin became familiar with verse choir at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, during the mid-1930s. His relationship with David Morton and John Theobald, both professors at Amherst and former guests on Rhymes and Cadences, exposed him to the thriving spoken poetry movement at the college, which included verse choirs formed by students. Amherst was the town of many successful poets, most notably Robert Frost, and Corwin submitted an article to his old newspaper, the Springfield Republican, about poetry in the college and town:

Poetry hangs from the branches of Amherst’s trees. It follows you down the streets. The hills surrounding the town have poetic ore in them. The grass grows greener in Amherst because it figures some poet will come along any moment and write about it.

There was a definite connection between Corwin’s experiences at Amherst and his decision to arrange poetry for multiple voices. In fact, this newspaper article, the result of lengthy research, was published August 1, 1937, the day before the first performance of Mary.

---

82 Ibid.
83 A “group of youngsters calling themselves the Koralites,” were the actors that he used in the first episode and off and on throughout Words without Music. Erik Barnouw, Handbook of Radio Writing: An Outline of Techniques and Markets in Radio Writing in the United States (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 130.
84 Norman Corwin, “Amherst Carves New Slice of Fame as She Creates a Poetry-Speaking Town,” Springfield Sunday Union and Republican, 1 August 1937, 3E.
Corwin had been adapting poems in one way or another ever since *Rhymes and Cadences*, but as he gained experience his techniques became more complex, eventually culminating in his verse choir works. Starting with a written poem gave Corwin a way to create his own radio art using the template of another, but in the first episode of *Words without Music* there are two radio poems by Corwin. Since these works, “Claire de Lune” and “Interview with Signs of the Times,” were composed specifically for radio, their radiophonic element was essential, and these works therefore deserve, in conception as well as presentation, the title “radio poetry.”

“Claire de Lune” and “Interview” were Corwin’s first radio poems, original works, not adaptations, composed specifically for radio. For the first time he had the “inestimable advantage” of a completely open format, as inviting to him, “as a bare wall is to a muralist, as a silent organ was to Bach,” he said. These two pieces also marked a beginning and an end in Corwin’s evolution of style. As a beginning, “Claire de Lune” was his first use of simplistic background music; whereas “Interview” was the farthest he ever went with verse choir techniques and marked the decline of this style in his radio art. Yet both radio poems represent extremes of Corwin’s earliest conviction that music and poetry can be combined successfully for radio art if done so in an “authentic” way. Corwin’s criteria for authenticity involved intelligent content choice for combination and performance practice that did not detract from the music or poetry.

---

85 Although there has been no major scholarly work on radio poetry as an international phenomenon nonetheless it is present in most national radio histories as well as having a significant place in many avant garde movements.


87 He may have scripted music or adapted music cues in his time directing shows at CBS in the months before *Words without Music* premiered, however “Claire de Lune” is the first documented instance of musical scoring by Corwin for one of his own productions.
Example 1. Drum part, “Claire de Lune.”

The technical effects for “Claire de Lune” are minimal, but effective. The beating of a solitary animal skin drum begins and continues behind the radio poem (see example 1. above):

**EFFECT:** MOURNFUL DRUMBEATS. . COMING AS THOUGH FROM A GREAT DISTANCE: HOLD MONOTONOUSLY UNDER THE FOLLOWING:

**LISTENER:** Far off in the night, drums,
No masque, no bergamasque, no lute, no caroling --
Just drums,
Drums,
Drums,
Drums,
Drums,

Say it again, drums,
Again,
Again,
Men are marching tonight to kill men
Men are marching tonight to kill men
Men are marching tonight to kill me ----

……in the moonlight.88

This is a simple counterpoint of music and poetry. Every line of text brings attention to and adds connotations to the drumbeats, while the drum adds an extrapoetic, material suggestion of reality to the scene. Both sound streams are transformed semantically in the second to last line of the text with the word “me.”89 This personal pronoun changes the conceptual scene from poetic (in this case two dimensional: words in time) to dramatic (three dimensional: words in time plus a

---

89 Ibid., 9.
spatial conceptual structure with two locations, “me” and “men”). And the drum exists no longer as a metaphysical embodiment of the text, but as a second character of a drama – the war drum of the infringing hoard.

“Interview” has the most complex scoring as any other Corwin radio work. This one minute and twenty second radio poem pushed the limits of radio script typography with ten separate voices, seventy voice cues, contrapuntal textures, and five separate choir groupings. Directing the performance was nothing less than conducting a musical ensemble. Its themes cover electric signage, barrages of commercials, and trance inducing advertisements in three brief sections, the first describing the lights and movement of Broadway’s signs:

1st MAN: We blink
2nd MAN: And twinkle
3rd MAN: Wriggle and wrinkle
4th MAN: Twist an’ squirm an’
5th MAN: Act like vermin.

1st WOMAN: We glitter; we
2nd WOMAN: Are jittery;
3rd WOMAN: We [litter] the sky
4th WOMAN: With blinking \(^90\)

Then the female voices create a rhythmic texture on the words “winking, winking, blinking, blinking, …” that underpins the men repeating, “And up we go now, And now we go down…” \(^91\) The section ends with male and female unison on the word “sideways” with three progressively slowing repetitions.

The second section is similar except instead of contrasting male and female voices Corwin contrasts large mixed groups with a single voice. He forms another simple texture on the words, “And round, and round, and round…” by alternating one choir of two men and two


\(^{91}\) Ibid., 22.
women and another choir of two men and three women.\textsuperscript{92} Over this textural bed, one male voice lists the variety of goods and services that are offered by the signs:

\begin{quote}
We offer you shows  
And vend you clothes  
Advertise booze  
And flash you news…\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

This two-streamed section ends like the first with a unison phrase slowing with each repetition. This time they repeat the phrase “goods that are good” five times.

The last section once again divides the ten voices into two groups by gender. The choirs list dance types after repeating, “We dance St. Vitus rhumbas, In overwhelming numbers,” twice. Then all voices revel together “Hey! Nonny, nonny, nonny, nonny, hey!”\textsuperscript{94} Next the men deconstruct the word spell. “And now and then we spell! S-P-E-L-L spells spell!” Followed by the women, “Why do we spell? Well, you see. We spell in order to sell you see.” One final contrast ends the piece. All voices shout, “S-P-E-L-L spells spell!” followed fast by the punctuation of a “little voice,” “Our twitching is bewitching!”

“Interview” was a success for Corwin, a hybrid art of music and poetry. The words are not sung, but are spoken in a way that showcases the rhythms of the phrases which are repeated and varied.\textsuperscript{95} The content of the poem also had to be conducive to this type of verse choir execution. Here Corwin’s choice of Broadway lights and signs were easily expressed through chattering, rapid, and overlapping voices. Yet “Interview” was a hybrid, and therefore a compromise. By combining music and poetry to a single unit he had, in a way, lost both.

By comparing “Claire de Lune” and “Interview” we can observe a shifting point in Corwin’s style which was still affected by his initial desires for a radio art of music and poetry. “Claire de Lune” kept words and music separate for the most part. There is a slight imitation of

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 23.  
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 23.  
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 24.  
\textsuperscript{95} The first performance of the pirate show even anticipated the rhythms of “we dance St. Vitus rhumbas, in overwhelming numbers,” with fourteen beats mimicking the rhythm on a snare. The drum was taken out for the first episode of \textit{Words without Music}. 

38
rhythm in the speakers phrasing and the drum beats, but the voice remains separate and firmly focused on delivering its message. The music of the drum remains separate from the voice except conceptually as it shifts from a symbolic sound to a dramatic character. The music and poetry overlap a little in semantics and sonority but the main blend of expressions is left for the listener to complete. “Interview” on the other hand does not incite as much involvement from the imagination. It gives the listener one unified language to decipher, the verse choir. While this has an extreme potential that is no way tapped in “Interview,” for radio art Corwin needed something that left less chance of the imagination wandering. Rather than one complex form of art, the verse choir, he drifted to two forms of easily accessible art forms that could catalyze more complex imaginative activity.

Perhaps Corwin concluded that verse choir techniques had less potential than simpler combinations of words and music, because he did not continue to create pieces like “Interview” despite the attention it received for its novelty. Choral recitation had an impressionistic effect, useful for representing the spasmodic effect of the signs on Broadway, but little of Corwin’s artistic mindset had ever emphasized impression for the sake of impression. Rather his messages were direct, clear statements. It was the musicality of these techniques that attracted him, how they could give new shades to poems adapted to radio working toward greater cooperation between music and words. But Corwin became increasingly less attracted to adaptation and poetry appreciation and increasingly more attracted to original production as an outlet for original ideas. The musical effect he found most satisfying was actual music. And the finely crafted music cue was the straightest route to synergy between music and poetry.

Three weeks after the series premiere of *Words without Music*, Corwin broadcast his first original half hour radio drama, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*. Like *Mary* this was an original work, and, with the success of *Mary* in mind, he reused the same techniques to derive characters, theme, and plot for *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*. *Mary* used the public’s familiarity with the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as a template. The rhyme provided Corwin with
characters and a plot. In a similar way, Corwin used the popular character of Santa, recently redesigned by Coca Cola Company in 1931. The soda company created a jolly, fat, and white bearded man in red derived from Clement Clark Moore’s poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (1822). Coca Cola’s new visual representation became the iconic figure of American Christmas culture, a status confirmed in 1934 when the song *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* became popular. As an antagonist Corwin chose Nero, another clichéd icon in American culture, and the popular phrase, “Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” was another key plot point for Corwin.

As with *Mary*, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* also parodied mass media formats such as radio and newspaper. Sections of *Mary* are portrayed as newspaper stories or broadcast news, and *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* is entirely a fantastical piece of radio journalism with remote pickups from Hell and the North Pole and the inevitable “intraterrestrial static” which occurs when entering the Underworld. A self-declared *sotto voce* announces from within the scenes and reads a newspaper weather report. By staging *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* as a radio broadcast, Corwin began a favorite referential technique that constantly reminded the listener of the technology of radio. His first series, *Rhymes and Cadences* and *Poetic License*, as with most radio shows, had no pretense to create a fictional reality. In *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* there is a reluctance to fully embrace radio drama, which escapes its own medium

---

97 Corwin also mimicked the rhyming meter of Moore’s poem for *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*.
99 Corwin’s real addition to the popular American Santa narrative is conflict. There is conflict in the original Nativity story and conflict in the legend of St. Nicholas, but where is the conflict in *A Visit from St. Nicholas* or the polished Coca-Cola Santa? *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* is an early and perhaps the first fictional story in the “something-saves-Santa” genre in America. It is even pre-*Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer* (1939).
100 The “Daily Hellion” report (a Daily Clarion parody) reads: “Continued heat both overhead and under feet…North by westerly – light showers of brimstone toward the evening hours.” Ibid., 101.
through fiction. Instead of creating an alternate realism for his drama to take place in, Corwin fictionalizes the radio broadcast.

_The Plot to Overthrow Christmas_’s plot takes place in two environments – Hell and the North Pole. It begins in Hell surrounded by flames and heat and the voices of infamous villains from history. Nero is called to a meeting where the Devil will share an evil scheme. The Devil reveals that he wants to start a war on Christmas and asks for ideas on how to topple the holiday. Haman and Ivan the Terrible begin by derailing the meeting with a bureaucratic scuffle. When the meeting gets back on track Caligula suggests giving out poisonous pastries and booby-trapped gifts; “Men will HANG from Christmas trees,” he growls. Nero makes his own music themed suggestion, and Simon Legree, the slave owner from _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_, counters with a scheme involving bribing the Senate to outlaw Christmas. But Lucrezia Borgia, the only female voice in the radio play, creates the winning scheme – to kill Santa. Nero is chosen for the task. He makes his way to the North Pole with every intention of assassinating the saint, but Santa’s kindness and a strategic gift wins Nero over to the side of good.

Music in _The Plot to Overthrow Christmas_ is a mixture of Corwin’s early reluctance to mix music with speech and the cautious attempt to integrate music heard in “Claire de Lune.” The solution was to use primarily diegetic music combined with musical ideas expressed in the

---

101 Infamous, historical and mythical characters, including Haman, Ivan the Terrible, Caligula, Lucrezia Borgia, Nero, and others, plot to destroy Christmas by killing Santa Claus. The similarity to Master’s _Spoon River Anthology_ is undeniable. The “Epilogue” of the anthology is a metaphysical play that also has a group of infamous antagonists. Loki the damned Norse god, Yogarindra a deceitful Hindu god, and Beelzebub plot to rouse the ghosts of the dead of Spoon River’s grave yard.

Corwin’s own group of villains also converse by completing rhyming couplets. Compare Corwin’s, “IVAN: Sit down, there, Haman! Enough of this folly! HAMAN: Sit down yourself – you’re off your trolley!” to Master’s “YOGARINDRA: I have a game! Let us make a man. LOKI: My net is waiting for him, if you can.” [Norman Corwin, _Thirteen by Corwin_ (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 94. Edgar Lee Master, _Spoon River Anthology_ (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 290.]
Music is Nero’s path to redemption. It is Nero’s love of music that leads him to abandon his assassination attempt and to embrace “good cheer,” even to the point of offering to help make toys. Contrasts of hot and cold, tension and calm musically frame the radio play. Nero performs on the violin twice, first he fiddles a heated cadenza in the beginning of the radio play while Hell burns around him, and toward the end, he piously bows “Noel” at the North Pole.

While the evil characters in Hell discuss their plot, Nero proposes a strictly musical scheme:

NERO. I’ve heard just lately, men are giving the razz
To classical music by making it jazz:
They’re swinging Bach, and what is keener,
They’re doing the shag to Palestrina.
As a connoisseur of music, of course I love
The works of Rimsky-Korsakov,
But today I note, with a bitter shrug,
They’ve made Scheherazade a jitterbug!

DEVIL. Much as we admire your clever rhyme,
Will you get to the point? We’re wasting time.

NERO. I was just about to say, when interrupted,
That Christmas can easily be corrupted
If you take and swing all the Christmas carols.
Why, think of the evil! Just barrels and barrels
Of sacrilege, every time you play
A pious song in a profane way.
Why, once you entice ‘em to swing Noel,
Then victory belongs to us fiends! . . . Well?

At the end of the radio play the gift of a Stradivarius – the ultimate present for a violinist and a “connoisseur of music” – convinces Nero not to kill Santa.

---

102 The term diegetic is borrowed from film sound theory and refers to sounds which have visible sources. In radio art this idea can be modified and used in reference to sounds which are scenically justified as opposed to mood music or sounds.


105 Ibid.
Music, not Santa, is the real hero of this drama. Therefore, *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* is an incarnation of Corwin’s first ideas about radio art. Poetry is in every line of the radio play, and he makes music a central subject allowing it to work together with the poetry while avoiding simultaneous performance.\(^{106}\) A straight line can be drawn between *Rhymes and Cadences* and this radio play. Corwin first conceived of a radio setting which could present compelling poetry through an engaging performance, enhancing the poems with carefully selected temporally separate juxtapositions of music. *Rhymes and Cadences* embodied this idea. When he began *Poetic License*, he shed his reliance on actual music; after all, his primary goal had always been to present poetry in novel ways. He began to create thematic narratives and use larger organizational methods, to replace the missing musical contributions. Thematic organization gave him infinite possibilities for variation, but with a deficit of sonorous techniques. He was limited to elocution techniques, bound to clarity of speech. To escape his technical doldrums, he turned back to music and radio drama was a byproduct. He began to infuse musical methods into his poetry performance. First, *Mary* built on the musical variation style, then he explored verse choir culminating with “Interview with Signs of the Times,” and the multiple voices of these pieces created multiple characters. Simple radio dramas were the inevitable result. This satisfied him initially as he moved into his time at CBS with the series *Words without Music*.

However, “Interview with Signs of the Times” was the end of Corwin’s experimentation with verse choir exactly because of its success.\(^{107}\) Corwin heard more possibility in his simple “Claire de Lune” with its drum beat underscore, than in his virtuosic “Interview.” The drum

---

\(^{106}\) Perhaps a nod to Corwin’s early insistence that music and poetry be performed separately Nero shouts, “How dare you interrupt me in the middle of a movement of my favorite concerto?” when in the opening scene a courier delivers a message to Nero. Music and words overlap briefly in this scene, and this trespass is loudly scolded. Norman Corwin, *Thirteen by Corwin* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 91.

\(^{107}\) It was even honored as a special feature in the radio play *Crosstown Manhattan*, December, 29, 1938, in the prestigious *Columbia Workshop* series, then directed by William Robson.
brought music into his radio art, and this music was centrally positioned through the simple radio drama, which the radio poem turned into. “Drums, drums, drums…” every word took the music to new depths of pathos. Corwin had found in “Claire de Lune” an engaging radio piece that combined almost every technical element he had gathered. The only thing missing was length and multi-voice arrangement. The Plot to Overthrow Christmas incorporated these last two elements through radio drama.

This progression shows that Corwin did not begin writing radio drama directly. It was the result of four years of trial and almost a hundred separate episodes of Rhymes and Cadences and Poetic License. The initial motive for this evolution in style was his basic goal to make radio a proper vehicle for his culturally idealized conceptions of poetry and music. Alan Lomax, ethnomusicologist, radio artist, and Corwin’s contemporary, remembered that before going into radio he “didn’t know anybody could be seriously interested in working on the radio, a pile of crap. Then I heard Corwin’s broadcasts and I did a flip, I realized that radio was a great art of the time.”

Corwin also noted the waste of radio space – “sissified” poetry sloshing in a sea of semi-improvised organ accompaniments fell a disgraceful distance from “the finest thing done in radio (Shakespearean drama and symphonic music.)” But instead of switching off, turning the dial, or waiting for someone else to change the situation, he placed himself in front of the microphone. He faced his own aesthetic problems with radio art excitedly and boldly and was repaid not only by creating art that he felt was aesthetically worthy, but he also began to realize

---


Corwin used the term “sissy” to represent what he considered the contemporary male negative view of poetry. Quoted in a Microphone article on Rhymes and Cadences he said, “poets are human and approachable people – not ‘sissies’ with flowing locks,” while his co-host, Kalman, went on to say, “Poets eat cold chops and get into trouble like anyone else (Microphone, 26 May 1934, 3).” About Words without Music Corwin said, “I think there is little doubt that this program has been helpful in dispelling the idea that poetry is a ‘sissy’ idea (New York Times, 26 March 1939, 144).” Another time in a letter he said, “I have a suspicion that many men regard poetry as sissified, just as they did music not so long back (Corwin 1994, 16).”
the social impact his radio art could have. A few weeks after *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*,
in his next radio drama, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*, he proved that his
success could pilot his most deep seeded convictions of anti-fascism, hatred of war, and,
ultimately, peace on earth.
The impermanence of sound defines broadcast radio; when the sound stops, in a sense, the radio station ceases to exist. This impermanence creates an almost paranoiac atmosphere in which programmers add signposts, reminders, and contextualizing elements to keep listeners from turning or losing the constant awareness of their place on the radio dial. The result is that entire subsets of words, sounds, and music are the framework for other words, sounds, or music. During early American radio art practitioners and writers called these framing elements “continuity,” and, in this thesis, I create a dichotomy between continuity and content framed by continuity, which I refer to simply as content.

Station breaks, schedule information, separating silences, theme songs, and improvised fillers are just a few examples of what would fall under the general concept of continuity. A broad function unites these different types of continuity – they situate the radio event in a certain context of time, place, authorship, theme, or ritualized format. Audiences experience broadcast radio as a single signal in time, and, for most radio artists, continuity is a result of the constant need to contextualize what is being heard or what has already been heard – again, a relentless battle to reverse the impermanence of sound.

As opposed to continuity, featured content momentarily ceases this battle with impermanence. Content is a self-sufficient message or succession of sounds. It can include instrumental music, songs, newscasts, sermons, interviews, weather and traffic reports, entire radio plays, and poetry. Polemics of programmatic vs. abstract, subjectivity vs. objectivity, and communication vs. presentation can be observed in radio through the relationship of continuity to

---

content, but like all elements of radio, functions unavoidably overlap, and, in moments when the two work supremely well together, the two can swap places or blur into one another.

Norman Corwin’s progressive experimentation with the simple and necessary dynamic between continuity and content eventually led to a key technique in his repertoire. By studying this dynamic from his first series to *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* (1939), his second radio drama at CBS, we can gain insights into this important and universal relationship in radio art. Also, the field of radio play analysis is in need of critical tools to supplement existing techniques. What follows is first an analysis of one of Corwin’s radio plays using printed materials as primary sources. Those materials are radio play scripts that use words, and the analysis that follows is primarily a literary example. After that, we will look at how musicological approaches to radio play analysis – which rely also upon listening, sounding, and the acoustic – can enhance the first literary analysis.

**Literary Approach**

This dynamic of continuity and content is particularly important to the study of Corwin’s radio art, since it was through continually adapting this relationship that he developed the organizational formats of his mature radio play style epitomized in *On a Note of Triumph*. This style, characterized by authoritative, self-involved, and highly poetic narration, is first heard in its essential form in Corwin’s second radio drama at CBS, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*. *They Fly through the Air* was a direct response to world events in the late 1930s. This radio play was inspired by the same event that inspired Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) – the bombing of civilians in Guernica, Spain, during the Spanish Civil War. By September of 1939, an even larger war had started as Germany commenced air raids on Poland. Days later Britain responded with air raids releasing thousands of bombs and millions of propaganda leaflets in Germany. The same week a CBS evening broadcast began:

Tonight the *Columbia Workshop* was to have repeated *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*, Norman Corwin’s verse drama about the aerial bombardment of civilian populations. The performance was scheduled two months ago, but since that time the war tactics, which the author indicted with such emotional force, have become an actuality, that we are reminded only to vividly everyday of the point of the play. For this reason we are indefinitely postponing tonight’s performance of *They Fly through the Air*.

*They Fly through the Air*, Corwin’s first national success, was too successful. After its first broadcast on February 19, 1939, a thousand positive letters poured in, and newspaper reviews and magazine articles gave it national exposure. It was performed only once more, on the April 10, 1939 broadcast of *Columbia Workshop*, and in May of that year it won the Ohio State Institute for Education by Radio annual award for best individual dramatic program. *They Fly through the Air* was a turning point in Corwin’s career. Nearly all of his later radio plays would touch on, if not completely focus on, the peril of war, the evils of fascism, and the hope of world peace – the themes of *They Fly through the Air*. And the basic style of highly poetic, hyper-integrated narration used in this radio play became a key feature of his mature style used in works like *We Hold these Truths* and *On a Note of Triumph*.

Like *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*, *They Fly through the Air* contains techniques, forms, and subjects directly traceable to Corwin’s earlier radio projects, and it allows another valuable opportunity to examine his development as a radio artist. This development is centered on the last shift in the role of Corwin’s own voice in his radio works, from a basic announcer, to an invested presenter, to an orchestrator of poetry, and finally (when we all but cease to hear his actual voice) to radio poet. Each step is characterized by a shift in the way he used continuity.

*They Fly through the Air* has a short plot played out in realistic sounding scenes. These scenes are organized in a traditional radio drama style that uses a narrator to establish the atmosphere before a scene begins, quickly communicate any back story, connect scenes, and generally provide flow in the radio drama. However, Corwin’s narrator, played by House Jameson (1902-1971), while remaining an unnamed voice of continuity, does not stay within the

---

112 Norman Corwin, *So this is Radio*, Haendiges 89749A, 7 September 1939, cassette.
bounds of support and neutrality. Instead the Narrator interjects himself into the radio drama scenes, comments on the action, and speaks, even shouts at the characters. This active narration is the defining technique of They Fly through the Air. The action that occurs in the mind/voice of the Narrator is as important as the action that occurs in the radio drama scenes. The dramatic arch of the radio drama sequences is the literal arch of every airplane flight: up and then down. The radio drama follows a doomed mission of a bomber plane and its crew. After the bomber takes off we hear the morning sounds of occupants of an apartment complex. The families are eating breakfast, arguing over small issues, someone is practicing piano, and they are all busily unaware of their fate – “the antithesis of abstract,” wrote Corwin.

An air raid ensues, and the civilians die. The bomber goes on to destroy a warehouse full of workers and to gun down fleeing refugees. Vengeance is swift, and an enemy shoots down the bomber. The crew dies in the crash, and noiseless “oil and blood draining into the ground” end the radio play.

These scenes of realism are dwarfed by the Narrator’s presence. It is not in the radio drama that They Fly through the Air really happens but in the Narrator’s hearing, sight, thought, and speech. The Narrator does not fill a typical scene setting role. He is the scene. When he starts talking the radio play begins, and when he stops it ends. His long monologues, reflective tangents, and commentary within scenes make up the bulk of the radio play.

This degree of poetic narration does not follow the general practice of the time. Instead, a line from They Fly through the Air hints at the stylistic influence: “A poem, perhaps? Aha, that’s IT! A poem!” They Fly through the Air is best understood as a long radio poem in the

---

114 Norman Corwin, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 56.
115 Norman Corwin, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 40.

 Actually, Corwin vacillates on whether to call his radio writing poetry at all. At this point he seems comfortable calling himself a poet. But a few years later he questioned this. His masterpiece, On a Note of Triumph, although full of rhyme, alliteration, and spoken cadences, he stated was not a poem. He went as far as to call it a “non-poem.” There is no explanation for
same stream as Corwin’s other poetry experiments; it was after all an episode of *Words without Music*. He even referred to it as a poem in the introduction of its second performance on April 10, 1939. As we saw in the previous chapter, stylistic elements of *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* can be traced to Corwin’s early experiments with music and poetry, but *They Fly through the Air* reflects a different developmental stream in Corwin’s early radio work that happened alongside and increasingly inside his poetic/musical experimentation. Just as he experimented with content, he also experimented with how he framed that content. The defining characteristics of Corwin’s mature narration style – authoritarian, self-involved, and highly poetic – find their sources in his early radio shows and are products of his former continuity techniques.

We have already seen how his earliest program, *Rhymes and Cadences*, contained basic introductions to poems and music, suggesting that he may have even been more comfortable improvising his earliest continuity. What is implied in this simple style of announcing is that Corwin and Kalman *chose* the poems and musical pieces. This is taken for granted, and almost not worth mentioning, but the control exerted through simple selection and ordering in this poetry and music show has much different outcomes when applied to radio drama or another type of radio play. This authoritarianism translated into radio drama would create a narrator (the mirror role of the announcer or disc jockey) with supreme control of the scenes introduced – the exact scenario we find in *They Fly through the Air*.

these statements, but they seem to refer to the sounding necessity of radio art – that it is for the ear, not the eye. Perhaps if he had a firm understanding of radio poetry in the history of other nations he could have accepted himself as a radio poet, instead of the perpetual poet laureate of a radio yesteryear. Norman Corwin, *On a Note of Triumph* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 7.

Matthew Williams described his poetry correctly as not verse or rhyme “but a peculiar heightening of intellect or senses that finds expression in words used with a rich sense of their denotations and connotation, and which naturally tends to verse.” Matthew Williams, “Radio Plays as Literature,” *Hollywood Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 1 (Oct 1945): 42.

By his second poetry series, *Poetic License*, he began to carefully compose his continuity, and integrate himself as a central character in the dramaturgy of the episodes. The August 23, 1937, *Poetic License* episode, which he referred to as “War Program,” is a good example of this shift to self-involved announcing. He even opens with “on my way here tonight I passed no barricades, I was challenged by no sentries, and I walked the sidewalks of New York…”¹¹⁷

The theme of “War Program” was poetry about war. The scripted introduction points out how absurd a radio program about poetry would be to listeners living during wartime. Corwin wrote, “In fact, I don’t think an audience of Shanghaians or Madrilenos [referring to the contemporary Second Sino-Japanese War and Spanish Civil War] would be particularly interested in anything anybody had to say about poetry right now.”¹¹⁸ However, he made an exception for poetry on the radio that abhorred war and worked for peace, prophesying nearly his entire wartime radio career. First he pointed out the levels of anti-war sentiment in the arts, writing, “Music is generally so abstract that it can’t be bothered; painting (until lately) has glorified rather than condemned the institution; the cinema, bless its celluloid soul, has occasionally struck out at the enemy, and prose writers have with some glory done well by the keepers of the peace.”¹¹⁹ Poetry was a different case:

But poetry alone among the arts—and poets, among the artists, have been consistently at odds with the makers of war. poets, because they have a way of wielding the sharpest words, because they fuse and compress into the briefest forms the widest philosophy, the tallest wisdom, the deepest emotion …. because in their dealings with beauty they have come to love peace and order and brotherhood, and to hate war and disorder and inhumanity and exploitation.¹²⁰

After a substantial introduction for a twelve minute program, Corwin only provided one or two sentences to introduce each poem in the program. But this introduction shows that Corwin

---
¹¹⁸ This reference to “Madrilenos” is a direct reference to the same war that the Guernica civilian bombing raid was part of. This was the initial inspiration for *They Fly through the Air.* Ibid.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1-2.
¹²⁰ Ibid. 2.
was making himself a character in the episode, and that his own views would unabashedly be highlighted. The style of writing also was leaning toward poetics. One of the eight poems he chose was his own “Claire De Lune,” later adapted for *Words without Music*. In an early draft of the “War Program,” this radio poem ended the episode last, introduced by, “But there will be more aftermaths…..tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow….And here is a piece of my own, written some time ago, but (I’m afraid) applicable this very night.” The repetition of “tomorrow” three times framed by ellipses, a reference to *Macbeth*, was a brief moment of expressive performance, and shows how he viewed continuity as a vehicle for poetics.

But the announcing in *Poetic License*, although self-involving and leaning toward poetic expressions, is still far different from the narration of *They Fly through the Air*. A large shift had to occur to change Corwin from an announcer to a narrator, and the clearest precursor of his leap from announcer to narrator is evident in Carl Sandburg’s “Killers,” adapted for the first episode of *Words without Music*. Sandburg’s poem described the psychological strain on a state appointed executioner. Corwin may have been attracted to the euphony as well as the sentiment of “Killers.” The word “kill” in various forms is a structural element of the poem, and the last line of the poem includes four forms of the word: “I am the killer who kills today for five million killers who want a killing.” The poem begins with the executioner reflecting on his special place in society: “I am the killer who kills for those who wish a killing.” A short plot begins when a man is murdered. “He stood at the intersection of five sewers and there pumped the bullets of an automatic pistol into another man, a fellow-citizen.” Then the murderer is sentenced to hang by a jury and judge. The executioner has a flashback to his childhood on the hanging day.

I don’t know why it beats in my head in the lines I read once in an old school reader:

---

121 Ibid. 4.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
I’m to be queen of the May,
mother, I’m to be queen of the May.
Anyhow it comes back in language just like that today.125

William Rose Benét’s “Jesse James” immediately precedes “Killers” in *Words without Music*. The two poems are separated by this sentence: “Jesse James was one type of killer; but in a poem by Carl Sandburg we have a psychological portrait of another kind of killer.”126 This is continuity in a typical use, but within “Killers” a new level of continuity to content relationship is created between the poet’s voice and extra-poetical sound effects, realistic scenes, and verse choir techniques. Corwin creates this new level through turning the poet’s perspective in the poem into the narrator of a radio drama.

Corwin used the sonic suggestions within the lines of “Killers” as invitations for extra-poetical material. This made two distinct ‘voices’ within the radio poem: a reader, whose voice is the sonic quintessence of Sandburg’s poem, and the voice created through extra-poetic material. After the reader describes how the shooter “pumped the bullets,” three jarring gunshots sound out. Later, when the reader describes the trial, additional voices speak words that in the original poem are quoted, for example the word “guilty” is read by another voice representing the foreman.127 Likewise, the courtroom testimonies are given in the colloquial (composed by Corwin not Sandburg) as snippets of radio drama realism in the midst of the poem.128 The policeman says without a hint of poetics, “And when I got there I found the body of the victim lying on the sidewalk,” and, likewise, a witness describes the shooting, “and I’m on my way to the movies, to see a gangster pitcher, and all of the sudden[…].”129 Finally, when the executioner is haunted by the rhyme from his childhood – “I’m to be queen of the May, Mother, I’m to be

---
125 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 19.
128 Ibid., 19.
129 Ibid., 19.
queen of the May” – female voices, distorted through a stock filter effect, speak the lines twice before the reader says the lines himself.\textsuperscript{130} This sequence, along with the other sound effects and the brief uses of radio drama are all triggered by the internal cues in the original text of “Killers.” In addition, Corwin also created an overture and coda of sorts – a “PYRAMIDING” effect of six voices joining in one at a time repeating, “Kill, Kill, Kill, Kill.”\textsuperscript{131} These short verse choir sections function as simple musical frame that declares the beginning and end of the radio poem.

“Killers” is the final link in between continuity elements in Corwin’s developmental stage and the narration style he often used in his period as a prolific and successful network radio playwright. By playing the basic role of selecting announcer in the series \textit{Rhymes and Cadences} and \textit{Poetic License} he was asserting his control over the radio art. And in \textit{Poetic License} specifically we see him increasingly involve himself in the dramaturgy of episodes. What we see in “Killers,” however, is an example where the narrator is completely free to be a radio poet. The structure of “Killers” is a microcosm of the structure of \textit{They Fly through the Air}. The announcer of \textit{Words without Music} is pushed outside of this radio play, relegated to a short introduction and simple “you have been listening to[…],” and the narrator steps before the mike.\textsuperscript{132}

Even though \textit{They Fly through the Air} can be called a radio drama, Corwin decided to call it a radio poem, and just like with “Killers” the lines of narration (the radio poem) initiate the dramatic scenes. For example, the following both triggers and introduces the first scene:

These voices?
We were expecting them, for they it is who guide this big blind bat
And who will take her soaring soon.
They are flyers;
They are officers;
They are gentlemen;
And they are yours to listen to:\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 18 and 20.
\textsuperscript{132} Norman Corwin, \textit{They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease}, Haendiges 89740B, 10 April 1939, cassette.
\textsuperscript{133} Norman Corwin, \textit{They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease} (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 17.
As a provider of continuity, the narrator not only sets scenes but also editorializes: “I was pretty angry when I wrote *They Fly through the Air*, and every time I think about it I get mad all over again,” Corwin admitted. Just as he was the announcer earlier in his career, he is now the narrator. After the Radioman comments on the “nice symmetrical pattern” of machine-gunned down refugees, the narrator (Corwin) fumes:

It is.  
It is.  
A symmetry of unborn generations,  
Of cancelled seed.  
The dead below, spread fanlike in their blood,  
Will bear no more.  
The pattern is symmetrical indeed –  
Of ciphers linked, repeating down infinity.  

Max Wylie, a writer and director at CBS and author of *Radio Writing* (1938), wrote that the quality of continuity should parallel the quality of content. He used popular music continuity as an example:

Although the popular musical show outnumbers the program of serious music in the frequency with which it appears on the broadcast schedule, the continuity assignment is simpler because no one ever listens to a torch singer to improve himself. The quality of writing not only does not have to be high, it should not be; *certainly it should be no higher than the quality of the entertainment* [emphasis mine].  

Corwin’s stylistic development supports the reverse implication of Wylie’s statement and takes it farther. Corwin began writing continuity for poetry, and eventually his continuity aspired to the qualities of the poetry it framed – becoming poetry itself. It became poetry while remaining continuity, retaining the authoritative, self-involved roles Corwin had played as announcer, the result of which was that in *They Fly through the Air* we hear for the first time together the defining characteristics of Corwin’s mature narration style.

This analysis above adds to our understanding of Corwin’s developmental phase, and it isolates a formative dynamic in his radio art. Yet curiously enough, it involved little listening to the original radio play. Its resources were original scripts, some tattered and yellowed with age, marked with a young radio writer’s pencil and stained with coffee rings. I researched books and

---

134 Ibid., 38.  
stacks of letters in archives. But again, it did not rely heavily on hearing the radio play. This is possible because of the importance of the script in radio play production, and in itself is an authentic and helpful form of research. However, there are recordings of both broadcasts of *They Fly through the Air*. The following musicological approaches to radio play analysis will hopefully shine some light on the advantages of auditory analytical techniques in conjunction with literary ones.

**Musicological Approaches**

Compared to most of Corwin’s other works, *They Fly through the Air* is simple in form and techniques, and this simplicity is advantageous for a pilot study in musicological radio play analysis. Concepts in the field of radio art are inextricably tied with music and musical ideas; however, scholars have not addressed basic issues about music in radio play analysis. There are multiple ways to think about music in radio plays, but “which music?” is the central unanswered question.

To answer this question, I isolate three approaches and use the terms “music,” “musicality,” and “musicalization” to help differentiate among the three. The first approach is to focus specifically on what is traditionally considered music in a radio play, i.e. instrumental music, vocal intonation, or song. The second approach widens the inquiry and looks at the general musicality or musical techniques that may be applied to any type of sound in the radio play, i.e. composition through voice types, sound streams, or contrapuntal and polyphonic methods which use non-musical elements in what can be heard as musical ends. This second approach shifts the focus from semantics to acoustics. The third approach hears the radio play as a work in sound where all elements of music and musicality are inextricably tied in the dynamic listening experience, to the words and ideas in and around them. To elucidate this approach I adapt the concepts “musicalization of sound,” by Douglas Kahn and “musicalisation” by Rudolph Arnheim to discuss issues of interplay between sound and semantics in radio play listening and
composition. In all three methods, the fundamental relationship of continuity vs. content is seen in different shades.

**First Musicological Approach: ‘Music’**

The first approach, simply to analyze the music in the radio play, is a brief task in *They Fly through the Air* because there is no incidental or non-diegetic instrumental music in the radio play, and little music in the traditional sense. The only instance of instrumental music is when we listen to a child practice piano. Here no scenic voices are heard, only a portion of Chopin’s Étude in E major, op. 10 no. 3. The piano music forms a backdrop for ten lines of narration, making a striking contrast between the words and music: “Are these your drums and trumpets, enemy? Is this your war song, coming from a baby grand? Is this your reveille, your charge, your anthem?”

For a brief moment, the étude transforms from the diegetic sound of piano practice into mood music for the Narrator’s little defiant jest. It moves from being a purely content element, clearly separate from the narration, to an interactive blur of continuity, mood music, and content, as it is the focus of the Narrator’s speech. Showing how music is extremely functionally versatile.

---


Both Kahn and Arnheim use “musicalization” or, in a different spelling, “musicalisation” to address moment when the byproduct sounds of sonic semantic expression are made musical. I do not use this term in the exact way that these authors do. I have adapted the idea to address the idea of crossroads between music and words, sonics and semantics. This term is convenient, because it has some place in radio art history, because it refers to the creation of new music through incorporating material rich in semantics, and because it is a third ‘music’ word.

137 Andrew Crisell, in *Understanding Radio*, also points out that other elements within a radio play, such as music, can function as continuity within a radio play. Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio* (London: Routledge, 1994), 51.

138 Norman Corwin, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 27.
This étude becomes a symbol of peace in the war that ravages the radio play. In the notes to a second publication of *They Fly through the Air*, Corwin wrote, “The pianist in the original production was practicing the Chopin Étude in E Major. Any composition of like spirit will do.”  This suggests, at least from a compositional point of view, that the music was intended as a symbolic effect, soft tones of the piano contrasting the roar of the war machines, as apposed to a specific reference to Chopin’s music.

The innocence of this music represents a slight tendency towards abstract musical pacifism in *They Fly through the Air* and corresponds to the earlier “War Program” of *Poetic License* (“music is generally so abstract that it can’t be bothered”) which soon disappeared from Corwin’s radio work. Corwin wrote and performed *They Fly through the Air* in February 1939, and by April 1939 music played a much different symbolic role:

> The air we listen to must be as free as that we breathe  
> Or there will arise such dissonance and such cacophony  
> As will stave in the eardrum!

> Damn the very thought!  
> *There’ll be no muffling of the ear, no licking of the boot*  
> *In this America!*

*(Defiantly)* Come now, you men who make our music!  
Beat that out in harmonies for all to hear!

By September 1939, Corwin wrote, “I’ve no more right to ask to conduct this orchestra than I would have to ask a general if I could lead his army through a battle.” In the *This is War* (1942) series Corwin again used a Chopin etude to make an opposite point from that made in *They Fly through the Air*. Corwin requests a “tuneful Chopin Étude,” a strong allusion to

---

142 Norman Corwin, *So this is Radio*, Haendiges 89749A, 7 September 1939, cassette.
Chopin’s “Revolutionary Étude,” about Poland’s November Uprising against Russia in 1830.143 “Piano . . . fade in tuneful melodic Chopin étude and hold for about ten seconds . . . suddenly . . . smash down on keyboard with both forearms,” the music cue reads.144 “I was playing Chopin until you slapped your filthy hands on the keyboard,” a Polish girl spits at a Gestapo agent.145 She is subsequently condemned to a brothel for German soldiers, and we hear a “distorted variation of the Chopin theme.”146 In They Fly through the Air, music, specifically a Chopin étude, was a symbol of the transcendence of art, but by 1942, Corwin had weaponized that same music toward his holistic defiance of fascism. Piano wire can strangle as well as carry a tone.

In They Fly through the Air, there is no radio composer; therefore this analysis is able to fully focus on Corwin’s creative process. In Corwin’s radio plays the music rarely comes to the listener straight from the composer. The music is most often heard through a conceptual filter. The sound effect filter, a common device in Corwin’s time at CBS, changes the sound envelope of a radio voice making it sound distorted as over a small low quality speaker. This effect signifies a separate origin, sometimes metaphysical and sometimes mechanical, and is analogous to how music is heard in a radio play or radio drama, always filtered through dramaturgical context. Context is as important as the music itself in the listening experience. Michel Chion makes a similar point about film. His theories begin with the principle that there is no soundtrack. “The fact that there is no soundtrack means you cannot study a film’s sound independently of the image—nor, consequently, can you do the contrary: you cannot study a film’s “image” by itself.”147 How much more is this applicable to radio art, where all elements exist in sound?

143 Norman Corwin, More by Corwin (New York: Henry Holt, 1944), 268. He
144 Norman Corwin, This is War; A Collection of Radio Plays about America on the March (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1942), 203.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., 204.
Second Musicological Approach: ‘Musicality’

Another approach to music in a radio play is to treat all sounds as musical, including voices, sounds, and sound effects. In *Music and Discourse*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez directly addresses the implications of moving from a narrow definition of music to the broader realm of the musical. He writes, “The transition from the noun ‘music’ to the adjective ‘musical’ seems to me both fundamental and telling: that transition allows us to escape a totality wrongly conceived as unique, and to recognize the ‘musical’ aspects of a whole range of sound phenomena.”

*They Fly through the Air*’s simplicity again comes into play here, this time because it has only a few main sound sources. House Jameson’s narration is the dominant sound of the radio play. This is followed by engine noises and the bomber crew voices. After those elements there are the many less frequent ones, like gunfire, explosions, breakfast table sounds, piano music, and other briefly heard voices. Corwin was aware of the qualities of these various sounds, and the typical structure that he developed was meant to enhance the euphony of the radio poet’s voice with contrasting “zones of intensities.” He referred to this construction as “segmental” or “mosaic” and explained: “I was at some pains not to tax the patience of the listener with too much of the same color, not to be monotonous. I made more, I think, of the mosaic structure for that reason. I was careful not to bog down.”

The acoustic characteristics of Corwin’s radio art were motivating compositional factors not solely byproducts of literary and dramatic decisions.

Using the mosaic structure as a model, we can define the different segments of *They Fly through the Air* by their acoustic characteristics. If we consider Jameson’s voice as a generous mortar in the mosaic of this radio play, then the first tile piece is the scene involving preflight

---


banter, take off, and leveling out of Bomber No. 6 and its crew. The preflight banter modulates the established vocal rhythm of the narrator with the short syncopated phrases of the Pilot, Gunner, Radioman, and Mechanic. The first non-human sound is a slamming door, heard when the crew boards the plane.\textsuperscript{151} With this cue, extra-linguistic elements continue to be introduced. First there is a distortion of vocal resonance, a distant shout as the Mechanic asks, “Switch off? Gas on?”\textsuperscript{152} As the motor starts we hear raised voices as the crew yells their final procedural statements. After the plane takes off and the first segment ends, the motor’s sound remains and becomes the second dominant sound in the radio play and a mortar element like Jameson’s voice filling the space between radio drama scenes.

The next sound segment is a montage of three contrasting domestic atmospheres. The non-linguistic elements of these atmospheres are important defining characteristics. The first has breakfast table sounds, the second piano music, and a baby crying marks the third. The first and last sections include female voices as contrasting vocal timbres. The delicate clinking of dishes, slow arpeggios and harmonized melody of the Chopin etude, and the voice of the mother comforting her baby form a trio where calm, frictionless listening is most encouraged. The baby’s wailing, one of two screams in this radio play, draws us out of this peaceful womb, the cry transforming through a crossfade into the motors of the war machines.\textsuperscript{153}

The last three segments feature the three voices of the Pilot, Gunner, and Radioman.\textsuperscript{154} The syncopations, which contrast the dialogue from the river of narration, are still present here, but at this point have lost their novelty. Instead, new variations are created through explosions. The first segment has two bomb releases. A muffled explosion follows the first salvo, and the second salvo releases four bombs. The segment after this has one bomb explosion and bursts of

\textsuperscript{151} Norman Corwin, \textit{Thirteen by Corwin} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 59.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Norman Corwin, \textit{Thirteen by Corwin} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 65.
\textsuperscript{154} The Radioman’s voice is heard through a filter implying headphone source.
sustained gunfire for acoustic variation. The final segment is a gun battle between Bomber No. 6 and an attacking plane. The tension level rises with fortissimo crew voices in these segments. During the ensuing machine gun fight, random, short bursts issue from two separate guns. The attacker’s gun is filtered to audibly differentiate it, and the random gunfire ceases just after the second human scream, this time from the Pilot as he is shot.

Both screams in *They Fly through the Air*, the first from the baby and the second from the Pilot, are scored as sound effects, not dialogue. Many marvel at the sound effects artist’s ingenuity in creating passable sounds through inventive means, ie. fire through crinkling paper or broken bones through crushing celery. But here we have humans creating paralinguistic human sounds as a sound effect. This is a wonderfully ironic circumstance where humans become human in new ways through sound suggesting that the sound effect, a gold mine of aesthetic tension, leads us to the expressive center of radio art.

Contrasting the radio drama segments, the narration sections have static textures forming easy-to-follow streams of voice and engine. Jameson’s voice and the airplane engines form undulating currents as they dynamically rise and fall in contrary or parallel motion. When Jameson speaks, the engine sounds most often decrease, mimicking a move to a polite distance so that we may hear his voice clearly. And when they move closer and louder, as in the ending battle, Jameson is forced to draw in to the mike. The streams of voice vs. machine and the individually colored segments of radio drama form a dichotomy that has been expertly pointed out in the field of electroacoustic music. Dennis Smalley writes about this difference by dividing sounds into general typologies of gesture and texture.

Musical gesture, derived from our experience of physical gesture, is concerned with the tendency for sound shapes to move towards or away from goals in the musical structure; it is concerned with growth, temporal evolution, sense of forward direction, the impact of

---


156 As he explains notice how gesture is concerned with dramatics and texture with contemplation.
events, dramatic surface. Texture, however, is more about interior activity, the patterns inside sounds, about encouraging the ear to contemplate inner details; it is often more about standing still and observing the behaviors of sounds rather than pressing onwards through time. Gesture can be textured, and textures can be formed from gestures – the interplay and balance between them lie at the heart of our experiences in musical time.\footnote{Denis Smalley, liner notes to \textit{Impacts interieurs} by Dennis Smalley (Montreal: Diffusion I Media, 1992), 14.}

In \textit{They Fly through the Air}, the scene segments and narration streams amplify the typical roles of content and continuity through their musicality. The dramatic scenes, content/gesture elements, have a definite sense of time progression simply because of the attention to changing timbres, rhythms, and dynamics. Leigh Landy calls this dynamic organizational technique “narrative discourse.”\footnote{Leigh Landy, \textit{Understanding the Art of Sound Organization} (Cambridge and London: Mit Press, 2007), 74.} However, since he is primarily writing about non-linguistic music he clarifies: “‘Narrative’ here is by no means to be taken literally; instead, it concerns the notion of a piece’s taking the listener on a sort of voyage, one in which exact repetition of longer segments is rare.”\footnote{Ibid., 74.} Contrastingly, the sound streams of voice and motor, continuity/texture elements, focus on contemplation through repetition, static instrumentation, and stylistic consistency, ie. the motors remain relatively steady and Jameson does not break into song. The streams of sound instead give the listener ample space and time to become sensitive to the intricacies of Jameson’s voice and the engine’s rattle and hum.

Musicians created the first centers of electroacoustic music in radio studios, and so overlapping terminology and theory as we have seen with Smalley and Landy is inevitable. In 1951, Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète was created at Radiodiffusion-Télèvision Française, and in 1953, both Studio di Fonologia at Radio Audizioni Italiane and Studio für Elektronische Musik at Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk were established. Landy insists that musique concrète was “born of the history of radio plays.”\footnote{Ibid., 31.} Like many of his peers, Corwin’s experiments with sound contain ideas and techniques would later be used in electroacoustic...
music, but radio plays in general are not considered electroacoustic music. In *On Sonic Art*, Trevor Wishart, another electroacoustic composer and scholar, gives the simple reason why:

words “need not be related in any way (either causal or mimetic) to the objects, activities, or just syntactic operations, which they represent.”

The sound of a word can have little to do with its meaning. No doubt Corwin, a wordsmith, made decisions that affected the sound of his play for semantic reasons, but not all of his reasons were semantic. Some of his reasons had to do solely with sonority, especially if we consider larger structural elements. An analysis of a radio play, which momentarily divorces meaning from sounding, is blatantly incomplete but has its benefits when it is grouped with other analytical methods. Here it tells us that Corwin created *They Fly through the Air*’s holistic sound effect by contrasting more rapid variations in his dramatic scenes with slow modulations in his narration sequences, and that content and continuity inherently create contrasting dynamics, timbres, and tempos.

**Third Musicological Approach: ‘Musicalization’**

The third approach to the music of a radio play recalls the phrase that inspired the title of this thesis. *Anatomy of Sound* declares, “Let [radio sound], like music, captivate the sense by metaphoric utterance, by mood-stuff and far-ranging concepts. Let it say things in terms of other things, dissolve and modulate and set up new vibrations in the chambers of imagination.”

All sounds are unavoidably heard with – and unavoidably affect – the ideas around them. Douglas Kahn describes the concept “musicalization of sound” as, “a means to identify and supersede techniques in which sounds and noises were made significant by making them musical.”

Rather he insists that sounds can “destabilize” typical music tropes and have much more potential than their abstract musical qualities; “the semiotic complexity of sound and new ways of thinking

---

about sound” can invite “a greater range of artistic possibilities.”\textsuperscript{164} This is a common theme in early twentieth century music history, and became less novel as more and more composers began to use sound and noise, but for radio art the concept is persistently vital; separations between sound, meaning, words, and noise are constantly reinforced in radio programming to guide the blind listener. These boundaries are artistic property lines which maintain the friction needed to continually create affect by expressive trespassing.

Rudolph Arnheim, through translation, uses the term “musicalisation” when discussing sounds in radio drama that not only express some realistic action but also are expressive in musical ways.\textsuperscript{165} In Corwin’s quote from \textit{Anatomy of Sound}, Kahn’s concept, and Arnheim’s writings there is the idea that in audio art semantically expressive sounds can and should mingle with the traditional sphere of music bringing with the unstoppable flood of meanings, pictures, and corresponding ideas. Arnheim describes this process as a radiophonic Jacob’s Ladder of sorts, a portal connecting the transcendental and mundane:

In wireless the sounds and voices of reality claimed relationship with the poetic word and the musical note; sounds born of earth and those born of the spirit found each other; and so music entered the material world, the world enveloped itself in music, and reality, newly created by thought in all its intensity, presented itself much more directly, objectively and concretely than on printed paper: what hitherto had only been thought or described now appeared materialized, as a corporeal actuality.\textsuperscript{166}

To analyze this type of interaction is difficult because of the mental triangulation that every individual experiences while listening. Personal memories, preformed expectations and associations for sounds, words, and voice types, not to mention the quality of the individual’s radio set, all contribute to the individual experience. To meet this challenge, one solution is to isolate moments in a radio play that encourage interplay between semantics and visceral

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 15. Lawrence Kramer also writes that this moment of meeting “joins the sensuous and emotional satisfactions of music and poetry to the play of critical intelligence.” Lawrence Kramer, \textit{Music and Poetry; The Nineteenth Century and After} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5.
experience. For example, a soliloquy spoken by the narrator toward the center of They Fly through the Air, stands out for its attempt to construct this type of multilayered experience.

Corwin wrote this soliloquy to lengthen the radio play during a break, and used this opportunity to parse out what he wanted to happen in the listening experience. The soliloquy consists of the narrator’s attempt to commemorate the airplane attacks with the engines still humming behind his voice until he silences them purposefully. In a new atmosphere of voice and silence, where all action and all noise has stopped, the narrator then tries to compose a poem on the spot. After struggling to no avail he admits, “Our similes concede defeat,” and the poem as a symbol, like the Chopin etude earlier, is too peaceful to fight against such evil. He then summons the motors back and the interlude ceases as he follows Bomber No. 6 to its destruction.

---

167 Norman Corwin, Thirteen by Corwin (New York: Henry Holt, 1942), 82.
168 Not until 1941 in the radio play Appointment did Corwin indulge himself in a bona fide poem of hate not masked in narration and read it with his own voice. It is a poem written and read aloud by a spiteful prisoner of war. (Norman Corwin, Thirteen by Corwin [New York: Henry Holt, 1942], 295-296.) It reads:

This is a hateful hymn, and sing it please fortissimo to all betrayers:
A psalm of sourish milk and galling honey:
Anathema and worse,
Against the tyrants and the traitors.

This is pure hate:
Pure hate, Grade X and certified
And stamped and sealed: hot wax:
Print clearly on the label: Blood.

Hiss in their faces:
Breathe onions at their name:
Gouge out their eyes, but not in fun for money like the wrestling clowns.

Oh, we who love and love can hate.
There’ll be no spring this year.
Put it away. Put it aside.
No summer either.
Neither autumn.

The wreaths and laurel, put them in the icebox:
Seasons will keep, and Liberty will not.
This is a curse upon the quill-scratch killers squiggling terms on parchment:
The Caesar breed, so brave with anybody else’s life:
The generals: a stripe for each desertion.
An analysis of this sequence is best done with the aid of a recording since it involves isolating a fleeting moment of sonic imagination. Reading about a radio play and listening to one are vastly different experiences. Donald McWhinnie in *The Art of Radio* ended his thoughts on music in radio drama this way:

There is another book to be written about the possibilities, simple and subtle, of music in a ‘blind’ medium, and I hope that long-playing records will be issued simultaneously, for the only way to perceive the potential is to hear it.169

It is mystifying that McWhinnie does not make the stipulation of hearing actual recordings or broadcasts of the rest of the material he covers, but at least he suggests listening in a discussion of music. In a similar vein, Nattiez states “the essence of a musical work is at once its genesis, its organization, and the way it is perceived [emphasis mine].”170 The compositional process and organizational techniques of a piece of music may be easier to write about, but the way a piece of music is perceived is much less tangible. Nattiez also writes, “we are never so aware of what the meaning of something in a nonlinguistic domain may be as when we attempt to explain that nonlinguistic domain in verbal terms.”171 In most radio plays words are a central element, and so a literary analysis is a logical starting point but not an end. A sound world can exist by description in the imagination through reading a script, but imagined sounds do not beat against our eardrums like sound waves do. As Joseph Kerman writes about opera analysis, “the critical procedure involves a sharpening of musical awareness and an expansion of our range of imaginative response to drama;” so whenever possible our awareness and response should be guided in real-time by the sounding radio play.172

The narrator begins this soliloquy by saying that he needs to get away from the motor noise to think, explaining, “the music of the motors in monotonous; our meter will be

---

171 Ibid., 9.
influenced.” By calling the motors musical he has suggested that they be heard as music; by describing the sound he has brought attention to the sound. The listener is more aware of the rattle of motor, which flares up for a moment, then fades away. This attention is important because Corwin wishes to construct a silence. He tells us to listen, then takes away the sound. After an abnormally long pause we hear, “yes, this is better” followed by another pause, then, “it is silent here” followed by silence again. Jameson’s execution aims at the pauses, framing them. Corwin’s words then take the silence into the imagination. “The cogwheels of the brain turn quietly,” he says, suggesting a paradox: that we imagine not hearing a fantastical silence. He then phonates “Mmm,” signaling a breakdown of language.

The quietness leaves the narrator alone with his words, and he realizes “it’s harder than it seemed, a moment back, to conjure up conceits.” “Our language beats against its limitation,” and further into convolution – “for there is nothing that can be compared to that which lies beyond compare.” Hence he “cannot undertake this ode,” but must “return to things [he is] sure about – to the familiarity of Bomber No. 6.” He returns the sound of the motors to us, and suddenly his words fly unhindered for thirty fluid lines.

The aerial music of the engines gave Corwin confidence. “It’s a sense or feeling that you have clothed something that is naked,” he would later say about writing music into his radio plays. In They Fly through the Air, the engine noise plays an accompanimental role, and the motor music had the unobtrusiveness that the best incidental music in his later plays had while being inherently charged with meaning. In the interlude, Corwin took away the supporting

---

173 Norman Corwin, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 42.
174 Norman Corwin, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease, Haendiges 89740B, 10 April 1939, cassette.
175 Norman Corwin, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 43.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid., 45.
180 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
backdrop, pointed out the missing musical force, and then emphasized the loss. This silence
relied more on musical sound than anywhere else in *They Fly through the Air*, and this
relationship between supporting elements and featured elements points directly to the continuity
vs. content dynamic. In this case what is highlighted is the expressive quality when the two are
combined and blur into one another.

Consequently, Corwin deconstructed the process of layering sound and speech in radio
art. In this technique, the listener is pulled in two directions while experiencing the whole as one
event. Lawrence Kramer calls a similar phenomenon in song “a volatile interplay between two
attempts to be heard.”\(^{181}\) The music, or motor sound in this case, pulls the listener towards
sonority and visceral experience, while the words guide the listener into semantic cognition. The
result is deeper involvement with the radio art, cathartic experiences called at different times
“acts of charged listening,” “great anatomized acts of listening,” or “posture[s] of intenser
listening.”\(^{182}\) “It is from this blend of conflicting impressions that the sense of purification by
catharsis may in certain circumstances arise,” writes opera scholar Robert Donington.\(^{183}\)

From Corwin’s first cautious experiments he had been searching for an acceptable
synthesis of words and music along with a more complimentary continuity and content dynamic,
and *They Fly through the Air* was his first accomplishment of these syntheses on a large scale in
his works. However, the results were not merely combination, but the frictional, symbiotic force
of the two elements creating a new “epiphanic power.”\(^{184}\) Without the engine noise, his “rhythms

\(^{181}\) Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry; The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley:

\(^{182}\) Brandon Labelle, *Background Noise; Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York:
*New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1972), 59; Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry; The Nineteenth Century and
After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 139.

\(^{183}\) Robert Donington, *Opera and Its Symbols; The Unity of Words, Music, and Staging*

\(^{184}\) Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry; The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1984), 139.
jangle at the very start,” he began “stammering,” and was “reduced to tautologies.”185 He asked, “can phrases tailored to a patch of earth be stretched to fit the sky?”186 Does he have a hope of reaching the “chambers of imagination” he seeks?187 Yes, he answers. Yes, with the catalyst of musical sound.

**Conclusion**

Norman Corwin transformed the most mundane radio announcing into the voice of the poet. Announcing is, after all, the most direct line to the listener; announcements are never meant to be questioned but simply received. He did not generally riddle, did not hide his messages within abstract syntax, dramatic, or musical constructs, as many great radio dramatists do (the soliloquy analyzed above is therefore all the more poignant); rather, “I am by nature an anti-obscurantist,” he said. “I have very small patience with writers who need to be interpreted by a board of interpreters before you can understand what the hell they are talking about.”188 Keeping the function of announcer allowed him to keep direct lines of communication open.

The three musicological approaches I apply to *They Fly through the Air* show that the foundational dynamic in Corwin’s work, continuity vs. content, is not only a literary construct, but is every bit as much acoustic and musical as textual. With the first methodology, we see that instrumental music is extremely fluid and – with a word – can quickly pivot from a content element to a framing one and back again. In the second method, which treats all sound elements as musical, we see that the contrasting roles of content and continuity develop acoustic as well as textual identities. Through the third filter of musicalization, in an unaccompanied soliloquy, we

---

185 Norman Corwin, *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* (Weston: Vrest Orton, 1939), 43-44.
186 Ibid., 43.
hear Corwin’s inner dialog on the melding content and continuity elements – the birth of
Corwin’s use of heightened rhetoric against background music, a quintessential Corwinesque
technique.\textsuperscript{189}

Radio listening is built on an unrelenting, syncopated, often stumbling march of
continuity and content. It is the sustaining pulse of radio programming. Yet the continuity and
content dynamic can easily be ignored, relegated to marketing firms and avoided by scholars.
Corwin’s development as a radio artist, which involved internal assimilation of functional
framing elements, helps us to step out of the radio play and look at what surrounds it. We find
the same rules apply everywhere, and what frames radio content inevitably seeps into, alters, and
becomes its context.

\textsuperscript{189} “Corwinesque” was coined by Clifton Fadiman in the forward to Corwin’s second
published collection of radio plays. Norman Corwin, \textit{More by Corwin} (New York: Henry Holt,
1944), xi.
CHAPTER 4
CORWIN, COMPOSER AND COLLABORATOR

Every word that a radio writer puts into a script results in sound; every thought and action put into a radio production is consummated in sound. This basic fact causes some to compare radio scripts to musical scores, radio directors to orchestra conductors, and radio writers to composers. Statements like the following from the son of Giles Cooper, the British radio playwright, are common: “[My father] was completely unmusical, he liked listening to music, but he could not sing a note or play an instrument, or do anything musical. Yet his radio scripts are the most beautifully written musical scores in one sense for the human voice.”\(^{190}\) These kinds of comparisons are complimentary and expected since radio listeners are thoroughly conditioned to hear radio as music. Unfortunately, for Norman Corwin starting with a musical comparison is not helpful because it perpetuates the misconception that he was neither a musician nor a composer. This chapter corrects this misconception by constructing his musical biography before and during his radio career, discussing his use of the music cue and other forms of collaboration with composers, and analyzing three of his noteworthy compositions to show that musical composition was a foundational element in his radio art.

In his authoritative biography, *Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years*, LeRoy Bannerman states that, “Corwin, who never had a music lesson in his life, knew [music’s] emotional power, sensed its structure, and fused it into his rhythm of words and sound.”\(^{191}\) This statement is misleading because Corwin did have violin lessons and for a time entertained seriously pursuing composition. When he started at CBS, the demands of radio work quickly overshadowed his aspiration to compose, but radio art allowed him an outlet to continue his musical endeavors in a different way. Composers, orchestras, famous musicians, and audiences

of millions sounded out his musical ideas. He worked with top-notch radio composers, notably Bernard Herrmann, and with famous concert hall composers such as Aaron Copland, Benjamin Britten, and Raymond Scott. Kurt Weill’s radio opera, *Magna Carta* (1940), was featured on Corwin’s variety show *Pursuit of Happiness* (1939-1940), and the two planned on collaborating more in 1942. Weill wrote to a friend, “I have a feeling [Corwin] would be fine to work with. He is a real poet and very much on my line and full of ideas.” 192 Weill even invited Corwin to live at his house while they worked, but Corwin’s exhaustive schedule prevented the partnership. Even Darius Milhaud, a veteran radio artist, was eager to collaborate with Corwin when they met in 1971, but Corwin never followed through with the invitation. 193

### Musical Biography

Because Corwin composed in a specialized medium, under conditions that obscured his musical activity, his role as composer has never been discussed. That obscurity also extended to biographical studies and aesthetic scholarship on him, but thanks to Corwin’s published letters and interviews, there are now enough available sources for us to piece together a short musical biography. It begins when his older brother, Emil, took him to his first concert, a turning point for Corwin. 194 In addition to developing an appreciation of music through concerts, he was given violin lessons. It is not clear at exactly what age he studied violin, but by the age of twenty-three he was able to write, “before starting this letter, I took out my fiddle, which the folks brought me here, and joined a guitarist and a mandolinist in an hour of highly respectable jazz.” 195 It was “thanks to [this] little aborted career as a violinist” that Corwin learned to read music. 196

---

194 Ibid., 430.
195 Ibid., 14.
196 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
A poem he wrote in high school, “Ocean Symphony,” is an early example of a musical idea that would be important in Corwin’s later work. The poem has movements like a symphony, one of which was titled “Andante:”

And vespers time and all the winds have gone off with the day,
And darkness rises from the depths and spreads out on the bay.
The water is dispirited and hungry sea gulls cry;
The hills are prostrate in the west,
The east is only sky.  

“Scherzo,” reads:

The giant plowman of the skies
He toils an endless night,
The iris of his sightless eyes
Agleam with lunar light.
In foam-filled furrows now he lays
Typhoons to rise on sultry days
And now he whets his share with rain
And plants a madcap hurricane.

Corwin was pleased with “Ocean Symphony” and decided to include it on the first episode of his first radio series Rhymes and Cadences in 1934. That makes the performance of the poem part of Corwin’s first documented piece of radio art, but it also is an early example of his use of textual descriptions to transmit musical concepts. This is why, along with his violin lessons, musical analogies in his early poetry deserve mention in his musical biography.

What Corwin called his musical education occurred at the public library in Springfield, Massachusetts, which had a room full of 78 rpm records. “I went through the whole room in time. I borrowed every album there,” he recalled. This action caused him to fall in love with music. It is not clear if he supplemented his listening with reading material, but he loved

---

198 Ibid.
199 I say first ‘documented’ because Rhymes and Cadences was the first show that he exhibited substantial artistic initiative and which is documented by various sources. He had been in radio for a few years, and although there are at this time no documents to give detail to individual broadcasts, Corwin undoubtedly was creating simple radio art prior to 1934.
200 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
Beethoven’s music enough that, in 1931, while on a trip to Europe, he visited the composer’s birthplace.\footnote{Norman Corwin, \textit{Norman Corwin’s Letters}, ed. A.J. Langguth (New York: Barricade Books, 1994), 8.}

In 1933, doctors put Corwin in tuberculosis quarantine for three months. In his room at the Rutland Sanatorium was a piano, a piece of serendipity that had a profound impact on his radio art. Corwin began composing pieces for the piano, and although no scores of any of his piano compositions have surfaced as of yet, from his letters it appears that he composed one piece which he called a “prelude” and titled \textit{To Conquest} at the sanatorium. Later in that year, he composed two more pieces, \textit{Jazz and the Machine} and \textit{Satire}, completing “a trilogy on social themes.”\footnote{Norman Corwin, \textit{Norman Corwin’s Letters}, ed. A.J. Langguth (New York: Barricade Books, 1994), 15.} The next reference to musical composition, from a 1936 letter, is only in passing: “I’ve got some new compositions for piano ... is the piany tuned?”\footnote{Ibid., 29.} In 1937, Corwin began his radio series \textit{Poetic License}, and two episodes featured his piano compositions. The first episode aired October 13, 1937, and featured a musical interpretation of the poem “The Walker” by Arturo Giovannitti played by Carmela Parrino.

The second of Corwin’s compositions featured on \textit{Poetic License} was a musical supplement to “Go Down, Death,” a poem written in 1926 by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938).\footnote{Ibid., 38.} About this piece Corwin wrote in a letter, “I just finished work on a new (and I think my best) piano composition. You’ll hear it on the radio some day soon.”\footnote{Ibid., 37.} \textit{Go Down, Death} was first performed by pianist Albert Hirsch following Corwin’s reading of the poem on the last episode of \textit{Poetic License}. Later, the Golden Gate Quartet and Corwin performed a version of it on the January 15, 1939 episode of \textit{Words Without Music} which combined the poem text with Corwin’s music arranged with poetic text for the quartet.
Although the pace of his years at CBS left little time for composition, he did not give up his desire to compose. In a 1944 pitch for the series *Columbia Presents Corwin*, Corwin included a short biography which stated that “among his hobbies may be listed piano improvisations.”

“Everyone has dreams of glory,” Corwin wrote in a 1985 letter, and he confessed one of his was “composing symphonies.” When I specifically asked him if he wanted to be a composer, he responded:

> Oh yes, I pursued it with every intention of being a more than occasional composer. But I quickly gave that up when I realized how much creative effort went into the writing and production [of radio]. There were people who had the right to compose and I didn’t. I was an amateur – a rank amateur – and I had the good sense to recognize that, before I wasted too much of the network’s resources and my time on composition.

However, he did have a substantial musical outlet through the music that he scripted into his radio plays. He expended the same amount of work into writing and conceiving the music cues as into the spoken text of his radio plays. Music cues (scripted instructions to composers, conductors, and musicians) were the primary way he got across his musical directions, and therefore his ability to communicate musical concepts in words or “things in terms of other things” was vital.

The Music Cue

In the typical radio script of Corwin’s early radio career there were only three categories of lines: characters’ lines, sound effect cues, and music cues. The function and reception of these different types of sound overlap and mingle, but in live radio, the system of communication from writer to actors, sound engineers, and composers/conductors kept the three groups separate in conception. With the advent of tape, the script became less important as a central unifying

---

206 Norman Corwin, “Biographical Material, 1944,” TMs, p. 7, Norman Corwin Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
208 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
document and a producer splicing and mixing superseded it. However, until *One World Flight* (1947) Corwin performed his radio work in a live, script-based format, and even with *One World Flight* the episodes were performed live with narration and an orchestra and the field recordings cued up like sound effects.²¹⁰

Since he performed live, Corwin depended on the scripted music cue as it was the established method of communicating musical intentions to a composer. Although never codified, three basic types of music cues gradated on the levels of content direction they provide are observable. The simplest cue specified the location of music, leaving the mood and dramatic nuance up to the composer’s discretion. Corwin rarely used this type of cue as music was too integral to his creative imagination for him to not make his intentions clear towards the music. Only in the radio play *Descent of the Gods* (1941) did he use these simple directions. No creative descriptions are involved, simply where to begin and possibly how to stop:

*Music: Nick’s dulcimer crosses in, comes up, and sustains behind.*²¹¹

*Music: A shot of dulcimer over.*²¹²

Or simply:

*Music: Dulcimer.*²¹³

In *Descent of the Gods*, the Greek gods, Mars, Venus, and Apollo, visit America. Narrating the play is Nick, the Greek god of trivia, and he accompanies his narration with a dulcimer. Nick opens the radio play, “Pardon me while I tune my dulcimer. I like to accompany my own narration.”²¹⁴ Because of this nonchalant dramatic setting, instead of specifics, Corwin gave special instructions on the type of musician needed.

---

²¹⁰ *Document A/777* (1950) was Corwin’s first radio play using tape. It marked the end of live radio, and drastically changed the role of director in radio.
²¹² Ibid., 99.
²¹³ Ibid., 113.
Music. If your dulcimist knows his business you won’t need a special score composed. Tell him to doodle and improvise within the mood appropriate to each of Nick’s narrative spots.215

More common, but still rare in Corwin’s repertoire, were music cues that called for a specific musical piece. He did this primarily when the piece had a culturally recognizable significance, as in the This is War episode titled To the Young: “You wonder how a Tommy feels – wonder so hard that in a minute off you go to England, finding out. . . . Music: Suggestive of space. “Rule, Britannia,” comes in quietly and unobtrusively. We’re in England.”216 At one point Corwin even mocked this kind of cue by calling for “Anything but Brahms Symphony No. 1.”217

Max Wylie noted in Radio Writing that “there is a standard request in at least one-third of the scripts that come to [CBS], and this is it: ‘Orchestra to play a portion of a Bach fugue.’”218 He derided this kind of request for its vagueness, unless the music had a cultural context beyond its abstract qualities. Many radio writers wrote radio plays about a specific composer or piece. Arch Oboler’s This Lonely Heart (1930) is a dramatization of Tchaikovsky’s relationship with Nadezhda von Meck, and has music cues entirely from Tchaikovsky’s works. Alfred Kreymorg scored The Planets (1938) with selections from Gustav Holst’s work, but musical radio plays like this were rare, and Wylie contrasted the writers who made uniformed requests for instrumental music with another type of cue writer:

Many months ago a script came in asking for “music that sounds like an iceberg.” I remember that at the time someone in my office thought this was very funny. It was somewhat unorthodox, to be sure, but it was not funny. It wasn’t funny because it exactly expressed what was needed, and it was, furthermore, something that was deliverable.219

215 Ibid., 121.
216 Ibid., 277.
217 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 18 June 2008, Los Angeles.
219 Ibid., 357.
Wylie joked, “the iceberg people have the proper suggestive dramatic inclination, whereas the Bach people are tone-deaf.” Corwin used these kind of descriptive cues predominantly, and he even took this third type of cue to extremes:

- An introduction descriptive of the annoyance of Fifth Avenue at having to cross Broadway in full view of Twenty-Third Street.
- A schmaltzy Rumanian combination, playing a good five-cent tzigarnya.
- The kind four witches would play for an audition.
- A little prelude which starts out as American as Kansas City but suddenly and inexplicably goes Oriental on us.
- Cream off the top of Kostelanetz.
- The orchestra glimmers like a spray of sequins...

Corwin went beyond poetic imagery and infused humor and wit directed at the composer/reader in his music cues. He explained why he chose to communicate musical ideas this way:

I prefer musical directions of this sort to language like maestoso lento con espressione segueing to allegro vivace, because I think it quickly gives the composer an idea of what I’m after. However, Lyn Murray, who composed the score for “Cromer,” has always thought my musical directions scandalous, and he carries on at length in objection to

---

220 Ibid., 357.
226 Ibid., 255.

These little texts can be seen as reverse symphonic poems. After all they are almost as paradoxical as Richard Strauss’s statement that “Music must progress until it can depict even a teaspoon.” Quoted in Newman, *Testament of Music* (London: Putnam, 1962), 270. And then there is the scene from *Undecided Molecule* where Corwin alludes to Arnold Schoenberg’s tone poem *Verklarte Nacht* (1899):

Judge: I’ll have a slug of music by Lyn Murray – The one he calls “Verklarte Nacht von Chicken mitten Curry.” Is that title correct?
Conductor: I fear it is.
Judge: Okay, then. Play it.
Conductor: Here it is!

79
them. Yet he always manages to finish the score on time, and it’s invariably good. Proving absolutely nothing.\(^{227}\)

Through his music cues, Corwin took part in composition by thinking musically and having those thoughts take musical shape, courtesy of a composer. One cue from *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* describes the descent to Hell using a montage of recorded and live sound effects and music. By comparing multiple versions of this descriptive cue, we can glimpse a progression in Corwin’s imagery. The first two published editions of *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas* contain cues for the descent to Hell that are identical, straightforward directions that read:

Clang on Chinese gong. Two thunder peals. Oscillator in at high pitch before thunder is entirely out. Bring pitch down gradually and fade in echo chamber while heavy static fades in, then out to leave nothing but oscillator at a low ominous pitch; then raise oscillator pitch slowly. Hold for a few seconds. Then music pick up pitch of oscillator on violin and carry it into a lively cadenza, in bravura style, meanwhile fading oscillator completely.\(^{228}\)

There are several recordings of this radio play, and each sound team performed this cue differently. The first version in 1938 was sparse, with pauses and tinny, crackling static. The 1942 broadcast substituted a cello for an oscillator, and the sound effects person accidentally played the cue for the ascent from hell instead of thunder.\(^{229}\) Orson Welles’s version in 1944 is the most professional: the oscillator has a warm full tone and is handled carefully to provide a smooth even glissando down to the lowest register of the instrument and back up to meet with the violin cadenza. Contrastingly, the 1945 version with Henry Morgan handles the oscillator in a wobbly way skipping sections of the glissando. Although the written cue was the same, each performance was drastically different.\(^{230}\)

\(^{227}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{229}\) Ibid.
\(^{230}\) In this way Corwin’s music cueing was similar to the indeterminate composition movement that rose up around John Cage in the 1950s. In that movement composers wrote music which could be interpreted differently by each performer, and the score was a set of guidelines within which performers could move freely.
Corwin wrote another interpretation of this cue in a printed edition of *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*, published in 1952:

CA-RASH! Such thunder as you have never heard! The scientists say there are about 1800 thunderstorms in the earth’s atmosphere at all times. The two thunderclaps you now hear are in themselves a concentration of at least twice that many. Or put it this way: If thunder could turn milk sour, which it cannot, all of the world’s Grade A, even that untapped in the udder, even that which sits, homogenized, in refrigerators, would become buttermilk instanter; in some cases, yogurt. This is the kind of thunder the Narrator is talking about.

But no sooner have the mighty whomps and thumps, and their echoing thomps and whumps, faded from hill and hollow, than a noise like an army of aggrieved and hoarse lemmings, intermingled with a frying sound like that of a rash of bacon longer than the Nile (on a skillet somewhat longer, of course), plus an amplitudinous crumpling of cellophane, and a Niagara of needle-scratch, washes over our heads like a tidal wave; and, like all tidal waves, it recedes. When the last pop and sizzle has trailed off behind this phenomenon, there rises out of the depths of the bathysphere, an unearthly note that could only be the cry of the roc. It is at first a whistle, then a whine, then a keening, then a trill – and then – can we trust our ears? – it modulates and moderates to the clear tonality of a violin – a very good violin – obviously in the hands of a very good violinist. From the cavernous overtones that now laminate each brilliant note of a bravura cadenza, we may assume that somebody of no mean ability is fiddling in a spacious and drafty area, most likely underground. But hark – who calls?231

No sound team was needed to interpret this cue as it was only published, so Corwin unleashed his powers of imaginary description, humor, and wit. Perhaps this last version of the descent to Hell, written in 1952 at the tail end of his network radio career, was a retrospective, a nod to his entire career writing for the ear, a cue to end all cues.

**Collaboration with Composers**

Music cues were no doubt Corwin’s primary way to write music into his radio plays, but in some special cases he collaborated with composers beyond the script at length. A good example of this is the preparation for *Radio Primer* (1941), the first episode of 26 by Corwin.

The entries or sections are riddled with musical interruptions, short songs, rhythmic recitations,

---

instrumental interludes, and tied together with a continuously reinforced theme. A sung introduction starts the musical radio play:

SOLOIST. This is a Radio Primer.
QUARTET. Fa la, fa la, fa la.
SOLOIST. The most elementary show you’ve heard
QUARTET. By far, by far, by far.
SOLOIST. An alphabetical primer.
QUARTET. A,B; C,D; F,E;
SOLOIST. Degree by degree,
From A to Z,
Our Primer will prim
The radio industry!
QUARTET. The ra-di-o in-dust-ry!

This introduction is a good example of Corwin guiding composition in a substantial way. Not only does Corwin decide on the back and forth between soloist and quartet, but he has also given the composer words for eight lines and eight bars of music, a common phrase length.

Lyn Murray (1909-1989) composed the music of *Radio Primer* in close collaboration with Corwin. The two met in Corwin’s small living space north of New York City near Nyack, NY. The thatched cottage overlooked the Hudson River and Corwin compared it to Walden. “It was my Thoreau year,” he said. The particularities of the collaboration are not documented, but Corwin recounted the basics. He gave the script to Murray, who then made several visits to refine the music. As with most of his radio plays, Corwin recounts that he chose when there would be music and in this case he chose the ensemble of quartet and soloist. He said, “ninety percent of my indications were okay with [Murray]. He sometimes surprised me by going a little extra distance, and he was always right.”

Murray, who began his career in radio as a vocalist, excelled at choral arrangements. He led multiple choral ensembles, and produced and conducted arrangements for the Broadway musicals *Panama Hattie* (1940) and *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947). In

---

234 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
1986, he won an Emmy for his score to the National Geographic documentary *Miraculous Machines*. Corwin praised Murray’s skill by writing that there was “a certain discomfiture when [Murray’s] music was better than my words, which happened often.”235 And, even though Murray was an accomplished composer for multiple radio series as well as a composer for film, television, and stage, Corwin recounts that Murray considered their work together as his most creative.236

Because of the tight, unrelenting schedules that generally hung over Corwin and his radio composers, the level of collaboration in *Radio Primer* was a rarity in Corwin’s radio plays. Usually, Corwin had to trust the cue music to the composer, who composed within the written guidelines of the script. Time was short for the entire radio play process; Corwin wrote the majority of his radio plays within a week:

> When I was writing and producing a script a week I would spend my first day thinking, my second in despair, my third working on the early pages, my fourth revising what I had written in the first three, my fifth racing the clock to finish the script in time for the mimeographers, my sixth casting and conferring, my seventh rehearsing and broadcasting.237

This left only two days at most for the composer. After the music was composed there was only one opportunity for Corwin to hear and perhaps critique the music – during the one and only rehearsal.

In highlighting the relationship between composer and writer, Corwin included a conversation between himself and Bernard Herrmann in his series *So This is Radio*. The conversation unfolds:

**Radio Director:** Now right here what I want is something to convey the sense that this is a program about radio, and at the same time give the feeling of a punch opening.

**Radio Composer:** Do you have any special effects in mind?

---

236 Ibid., 289.
Radio Director: Well I thought we might start out with two streams of code, symbolizing radio communication and let the code run a while. Then take up the pitch and tempo core of the code, and develop the material into a good strong fanfare.

Radio Composer: You know what I think would be better? Begin with code as you say dad a dad ada and then sneak in a background of symbolic music but don’t go directly into the development. Instead save the music keeping the code constant and –

Radio Director: – now, wait a minute –

Radio Composer: – then suddenly come in with your fanfare. Now you do the code and I’ll show you what I mean.

Radio Director: Alright.238

The two then proceed to beep and sing together a mock example of the music cue which crosses fades into the cue played by an orchestra. The music cue alluded to was in Seems Radio is Here to Stay, which was scored by Herrmann, and read as follows:

Bring in first oscillator, with symbolic stream of code in definite rhythmic pattern; then bring in second oscillator at lower pitch and with contrapuntal rhythmic pattern.
Hold both until:
Music: Orchestra picks up pitch and tempi of both oscillators and develops material into heroic fanfare of salutation.239

Bernard Herrmann was experienced with music cues combining sound effects and music. His music for Rhythm of the Jute Mill (1936) was intended to come out of the sounds of the mill, and in a similar way, the opening cue to Seems Radio is Here to Stay seems to emerge from the Morse code. But it must be noted that the idea behind the music in both plays was the radio writer’s and not Herrmann’s, and this situation leads to a central point to the study of the musical aspects of radio plays.240 Any analysis of the context and functionality of music in radio plays must include the types of directions from the writer or director to those involved with the music so that the writer or director, along with the composer, can be considered a chief contributor to the final result.

238 Norman Corwin, So This is Radio, Haendiges 89749A, September 7, 1939, cassette.
Three Noteworthy Compositions

Because of his influence over the conception and inception of music in his radio plays, Corwin termed himself a “composer’s helper.” Once during a conversation with composer Alexander Semmler, Corwin said that because of all the music in his radio plays he felt “like a hatcher of musical chicks.” Three of those creations stand out for their novel conception, high musical quality, and the level of direct “help” that Corwin provided in their composition: Go Down, Death (1939), Poganyi Divertimento (1941), and Typewriter Concerto (1944). Because of these features they are profitable studies in how the radio writer can be considered a composer. These pieces are complete musical works contained and framed within radio plays. They represent a range of compositional methods by Corwin, including direct melodic and harmonic composition, electroacoustic manipulation, co-composing, and in-depth musical description.

Go Down, Death

The earliest of these works is Go Down, Death. Go Down, Death is based on an earlier piano work that he composed in February 1938 and a musical supplement to the James Weldon Johnson poem. But it is unclear if this music was a completely separate piano piece to be performed after a reading of the poem, as was common in Rhymes and Cadences, or if it was music to be performed during the recitation of the poem, as interludes or background music. Since the piano pieces Corwin wrote in his twenties have not been recovered, Go Down, Death is the only available musical piece directly connected to his piano compositions. The surviving recording, from a January 15, 1939 performance on Words without Music, blends the music and

---

241 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
recited text into a single work. Instead of using verse choir techniques, actors, and sound effects as enhancements, Corwin chose to turn portions of Johnson’s poem into sung text.

In Johnson’s poem, subtitled “A Funeral Sermon,” the speaker encourages the mourning family of a woman named Caroline. It begins and ends with the admonition, “Weep not, weep not, she is not dead; she’s resting in the bosom of Jesus.” The poem relates how God sent Death to bring the suffering Caroline to Heaven where she is comforted by Jesus and the angels. Corwin turned the opening and ending admonition and the central stanza of the poem which contains the title phrase “Go down, Death go down…” into a choral passages. For the moment when Caroline enters Heaven, “and the angels sang a little song,” Corwin composed a completely extra-poetical song for insertion into the adaptation.

As Corwin only learned the treble clef in his violin studies, he had difficulty setting the earlier version of Go Down, Death into notation. At CBS he had the help of a musical secretary to whom he dictated music, but as he could not have arranged his music for quartet, he must have relied on others to fill out the bare melody he composed. His pentatonic melodies are almost entirely in the keys of F sharp major and D sharp minor, since he used the scale, made by the black keys on the piano to compose. The somber poetic moods of the “weep not” and “Death go down” sections are in the minor key, while the angel song that Corwin wrote himself is in the major key. Only one section, the second half of the central stanza, melodically deviates from these two tonalities. The text reads:

---

243 Also recorded during this episode was a short musical piece by Corwin which was sung as part of an adaptation of Irwin Russell’s (1853-1879) “The First Banjo.” The music is for a vocal quartet and consists of a major pentatonic melody above a three-voice accompaniment which imitates a simple pluck/strum structure on guitar with the bass and two middle voices of the quartet. The musical passage embodies the poetic line “don’t you heah de banjo talkin’.”

244 “Go Down Death 1939,” phonograph record, Belfer LP-218, Norman Corwin Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

245 Ibid.

246 Ibid.


248 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired--
She's weary--
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.  

This phrase begins with the tonality suddenly shifting down a half step to D minor. From the lines “she’s tired” to “she’s weary,” there is a parallel melody that rises chromatically one step, reminding the listener for a moment of the F sharp major tonality. Corwin takes musical as well as poetic license when he repeats these two lines to lengthen this section to twelve bars. In every musical passage, Corwin repeats lines to fill them out to a 4/4 construction. On the last line, the melody concludes on an F major chord. There is a simple parallel here between the harmonic modulation and the poetic narrative. God asks Death to descend to earth, and the harmony descends a half step, only to rise back again when Caroline is in heaven.

The mood changes with Caroline’s ascension. Compared to the drawn out lines and pauses of the previous section, when the angels sing the tempo is steady and brisk:

Glad you here in Heaven,
Heaven Heaven Heaven Heaven,
Glad you here in Heaven Caroline.  

Corwin creates a polyphonic texture as the highest voice of the quartet sings these words while in lower tones the remaining three voices sing “Ha-le-lu-jah” in half notes.

These passages illustrate the extent of melodic and harmonic complexity in Go Down, Death. The other noteworthy aspect is the combination of the spoken poem with the sung poem at the composition’s end. Corwin voiced the text in the broadcast, and the Golden Gate Quartet, CBS staff musicians who were frequently in radio programs, sang the choral passages.

---

249 “Go Down Death 1939,” phonograph record, Belfer LP-218, Norman Corwin Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
250 “Go Down Death 1939,” phonograph record, Belfer LP-218, Norman Corwin Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
251 Corwin was so sure in his own ability to perform poetry in an authentic and pleasing manner that he recorded an entire series of poetry records for the Nation Council of Teachers of English. The recordings, titled Appreciation of Poetry and released by Columbia, contain nearly thirty poems.
the angel song, Corwin speaks the lines, “And Jesus rocked her in his arms, and kept a-saying,”
and along with the humming quartet he intones rather than speaks, “take your rest” four times.
The first time Corwin grasps to find a note to harmonize with the quartet, and in the remaining
three repetitions he emphasizes the third of the chord with the notes A#-B-A#.

**Poganyi Divertimento**

*Go Down, Death* was a rare moment in Corwin’s radio art. Not only was he the adaptor,
composer, and director of this piece, but he was also the voice actor and musician. His next
noteworthy musical composition, *Poganyi Divertimento*, was a strikingly different composition.
It employed unorthodox vocal techniques and electroacoustic manipulation of recorded sound,
and is perhaps Corwin’s single most innovative musical work. *Poganyi Divertimento* is central to
the radio play *Double Concerto* (1941), a story about two feuding musicians who are romantic
rivals as well as competing concert pianists. The radio play revolves around their backfiring
attempts at sabotage. In one instance, one composer tries to spook the other before a performance
by playing strange sounding recordings through covertly installed speakers. Instead of being
frightened, the intended victim named Poganyi, is fascinated by the recordings and uses them in a
composition with the piano, ultimately titled *Poganyi Divertimento No. 1*.

Corwin composed the strange sounding recordings Poganyi’s rival used. For the last time
in his career he called upon the Koralites, the verse choir whom he worked with in *Words without
Music* to sound out his ideas. He directed them to make “elongated open, closed, aspirate and
sibilant sounds,” and at his instruction they also “clacked, clucked, gurgled, popped and
pipped.”

Using these sounds, Corwin orchestrated and recorded seven little sound patterns
performed by the group.

---

253 These pieces are similar to a piece composed twenty years later by Pauline Oliveros
titled *Sound Patterns* (1961). Oliveros also chose an a cappella mixed chorus who made phonetic
sounds similar to Corwin’s. *Sound Patterns* was not only “outrageously creative for its time,” but
When Corwin slowed the recordings down he noted that “the most macabre sounds came out in an interestingly symmetrical pattern, and at sound-frequencies which it would be impossible to achieve by musical instruments.” He then had Paul Belanger, a pianist and composer at CBS, compose a melodic superstructure to accompany two of the slowed recordings he liked best. The resulting duet for piano and record player, *Poganyi Divertimento No. 1*, formed around the two recordings. Its two sections have harmonies, tempos, and meters derived from the manipulated sound patterns. The first section uses the recording for melodic material while the piano shifts harmonies around it, contrasting with the second section which has melodic material in the piano and the thudding, high drone of the recording form an accompaniment.

Corwin names this compositional practice “poganyism” in his radio play, and earnestly writes that “there is no reason why music should not seriously be composed against rhythmic patterns of processed sound.” There is a history backing up what Corwin accomplished. This type of composition later became an established genre of electroacoustic music called mixed music. In 1928, Paul Hindemith recorded two special discs with manipulated instrument sounds which some historians insist were to be performed with a piano accompaniment, although the piano parts have not been discovered. Like the dramatic use of Corwin’s recordings in *Double Concerto*, Hindemith coincidentally also called his recordings *Trickaufnahmen* or *Trick-Recordings*. Pierre Shaefer and Pierre Henry, two pioneers in electroacoustic music working at French radio studios, composed what is generally considered the first mixed music composition, *Orphée 53* (1953), for soprano and manipulated sounds on magnetic tape. *Poganyi* the piece’s notation was also innovative. The scoring faithfully communicates intricate articulations through notation that uses a staff system for approximate pitch ranges. Heidi Von Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 30.

---

255 Ibid., 149.
258 Musicologist Alfred Einstein said that the recordings, “bordered closely on practical jokes.” Ibid., 173.
Divertimento, although not composed within the same artistic milieu, clearly shares the same innovative spirit and deserves mention alongside these early experiments in electroacoustic music.

**Typewriter Concerto**

The last noteworthy composition of Corwin’s I will discuss is an example of composition through in-depth musical directions to another composer and creative instrumentation. Corwin had romantic notions of the typewriter. He was given his first one at the age of twelve, and had one as a constant companion for most of his career. He preferred to write on a typewriter, enjoying the satisfying percussion it produced since the sound focused his attention. He was so attached to his first Corona typewriter that he lug ged it across Europe when he was twenty-one. On a train in Switzerland it fell off a table, and he took it to the repair shop in Venice. It is no wonder that the typewriter became the subject of fantasy in one of his radio plays.

**Typewriter Concerto**, composed with Alexander Semmler, was part of the radio play *You Can Dream, Inc.* (1944). The radio play was essentially a series of daydreams connected by dramatic continuity. In one vignette, an elevator operator hitches his elevator to a star and shoots out of the top of a building with a beautiful blonde companion. In another, a husband bored with his wife’s conversational ability asks for “an intellectual-type daydream in which the girl of [his] dreams would be completely versed in the seven lively arts.” Still another daydream is that of a dentist with Adolf Hitler in his operating chair. The script caused many readers to “wince and

---


260 In *You Can Dream, Inc.* Corwin plays with the name Corona, writing that the stenographer soloist is “at the console of the great Corona” like it is a grand piano. He also refers to this day dream as “Number 8” a popular model of the L. C. Smith and Bros. typewriter. Norman Corwin, *Untitled and Other Radio Dramas* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945), 256.

261 Ibid., 257.
shudder” through its gruesome descriptions of an un-anesthetized root canal, and Corwin left it out of the broadcast.262

The daydream which opens You Can Dream, Inc. is that of a bored stenographer. Drifting in her daydream, she finds that she is “no longer knocking out a contract” behind a desk, but is in a concert hall “at the keyboard of a musical instrument” and surrounded by an orchestra.263 To her surprise, she is to be the soloist in a concerto for the typewriter. The music cue reads:

Music: Concerto for typewriter. It begins importantly, but soon retards and diminishes to make way for the entrance of the typewriter.

Our L. C. Smith starts with a bold, strong, even rhythm, but soon gets into antiphonal passages with the orchestra. The space bar, the carriage return, and the bell punctuate with effect. At length the concerto, being of one movement (and that brief), ends with a great flourish.264

The sound of a typewriter has inherent implications: that someone is writing and that the tempos and rhythms of the sound structure produced correspond to the writer’s flow of ideas/words.265 If a typewriter is featured in a composition, then the composer has two basic routes to follow. One is to accept the extra-musical implications of typewriter sounds and grant the piece a programmatic element; the second is to compose with rhythms and percussive sounds that do not sound like someone is seriously typing words and sentences. A well known piece for typewriter and orchestra, Leroy Anderson’s (1908-1975) Typewriter (1950), is an example of an

262 Corwin wrote that the “daydream was frankly an exercise in sadism and much too graphic and tasteless to broadcast, but it felt good to write.” At the end of the surgery the dentist asked, “Was his mustache white when he came in here?” Norman Corwin, Untitled and Other Radio Dramas (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945), 271.
263 Ibid., 255.
264 Ibid., 256.
265 “The visible side of writing conceals its invisible side: sound,” wrote Robert Racine, a radio artist who composed the piece Sound Signature (1992) dealing with a similar idea to Typewriter Concerto. In Sound Signature, Racine recorded twenty-two individuals signing their names with various writing utensils, including pencils, pens, chalk, and charcoal, on various types of paper and surfaces. He discovered that, “When writing, each individual creates a unique music.” Corwin in his conception and Racine in his composition display an open aesthetic that hears music in what is generally ignored as a sonic byproduct. Robert Racine, “Sound Signatures,” in Radio Rethink: Art, Sound, and Transmission, ed. Daina Augairis and Dan Lander (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), 141.
atypical use of a typewriter. The bubbly little novelty piece’s typewriting and bell ding is too repetitive and predictable to be the sounds of literal writing; even its ternary form (AABA) reinforces the theme of repetition not conducive to typical writing. The instrumentalist’s key choices are not composed, only the rhythm, and therefore Anderson’s piece lacks the variation in timbre and tone that comes from pressing a variety of letter keys.

Alexander Semmler interpreted and dramatized the directions given by Corwin, and unlike Anderson’s later piece, enabled a programmatic hearing of his piece. Semmler’s composition is an easy-to-follow wordless radio drama, and its typewriter rhythms mimic actual typing. The individual sections as they progress tell a story that is reflected in a condensed rondo form, an ABAC pattern analogous to an essay (A + B = C).

The A theme has staccato melodic material in the orchestra obviously mimicking and amplifying the typewriter’s mechanical motif. The B section contrasts the typed rhythm with a more sustained, legato melody which slows and stops. Following the B section, the typist then sighs, returns the carriage, and begins the A section again. Instead of relaxing as before, in the C section the mood turns tense, the tempo accelerates, and the whole orchestra forms a rhythmic and melodic unison on a modally distorted version of the original A section motif. The tension leads to a frenzied cadenza, and the final rhythms are punched out with a finger fatiguing virtuosity that ends with a final and forceful return of the carriage.\(^{266}\)

\(^{266}\) The surviving recording of *Concerto for Typewriter* is of poor quality, and therefore many of the typewriter sounds are lost. Since the score was most likely disposed of by composer Alexander Semmler, according to Illiana Semmler, his daughter, we must depend on the recording for any analysis. Another factor made it possible that the performance had mistakes due to mechanical difficulties. Five minutes before air time Corwin decided to critique the playing of Harry Baker, the percussionist who performed on the typewriter. Corwin was not satisfied with the final passage involving the carriage return, and he bypassed all intermediaries, the script, composer, and conductor, and went directly to the hands that were playing the music. While demonstrating how the cadenza concluded, Corwin broke the machine. A tense scramble across the CBS building ensued to find a typewriter that was not bolted to a desk, and only seconds before the actual on air cue did Baker have a replacement typewriter to play. The new typewriter was not the one rehearsed on and this may have influenced Baker’s performance which seems to cut out at times.
Conclusion

Concerto for Typewriter is the perfect piece to discuss Corwin’s compositional activity. The typewriter was Corwin’s primary musical instrument, not the piano, violin, or his voice. Even though the typewriter was meant for words, he found ways to make music with the machine. In Concerto for Typewriter its sounds joined an orchestra, and through music cues it silently guided the composition of hundreds of short musical works. Musicological studies of radio writers are rare, but Corwin’s musical activity makes this part of his life a key factor to understanding his radio artistry. The level of the author’s control and influence over musical matters in a radio play often necessitates that the writer be treated as a composer. Expanding on a similar idea Jean-Jacques Nattiez writes, “There is no reason to reject the analytical tools that have been developed as part of western cultural knowledge. We should moreover acknowledge that musicologists might be interested in musical phenomena that do not belong to ‘music,’ or that are encountered in sound productions that are not considered ‘music’ within the culture to which they belong.”

Even though radio plays are not generally considered music that does not mean that they do not involve musical activity even in basic script form. By treating Corwin as a composer we are struck with how the scripted musical cue was once a thriving musical art form. In a larger way, we see how radio plays can be vehicles for complex musical composition.

Hopefully future scholarship on Corwin will directly consider him a composer like this study does – albeit in a specialized way – not merely project musical analogies onto his work. Perhaps, his own silence on this subject had to do with a limb he once climbed out on in conversation with Aaron Copland. In 1949, the two men shared a taxicab. They talked about trains as they rode, Corwin remembered that “the sound of those trains flying across the rails is

---


268 At this time Corwin was producing a performance of the preamble to the UN charter which was televised by NBC. Laurence Olivier narrated, Copland composed the score (titled *Preamble for a Solemn Occasion*), and Leonard Bernstein conducted the orchestra at Carnegie Hall. R. LeRoy Bannerman, *Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 211.
something that aroused all kinds of romantic associations.”

He was fascinated with the timetables at every train station which were beautiful graphs full of symbols and “stars and asterisks and daggers, those marvelous typographical squiggles,” and which still used antiquated, nautical terms like “sailing time, sailing date.”

“A genius like you might have a lot of fun with a time table,” Corwin remarked. “Copland looked at me as though I were absolutely raving mad. He said nothing. So much for my seminal effect on modern American music.”

---

270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid., 50.
CHAPTER 5

RADIOGENIC RADIOPHONICS:
DISSECTING THE SOUND EFFECT

Narrator: Shall a broadcast on the radio impersonate the red jellies of the broken body? Or meter the convulsive quiver of the man who wouldn’t talk?

Sound: Whiplash

Narrator: who wouldn’t talk?

Sound: Whiplash

Narrator: who wouldn’t talk?

Sound: Whiplash.

Corwin cut this sequence from The Long Name None Could Spell (1944). The whiplashes – sonic flashes of pain – were too effective, each strike drawing a wince. This is an example of the final member in “old radio art trinity,” an example of Corwin’s genius in sound effect composition. He understood the power of these often brief moments of sound, and he innovated as much in sound effects as in words and music. Sound was a particular adventure for him: “I posited problems,” he said, “and [the sound men and women] were delighted to be assigned to develop or invent something. That’s what made it exciting for me.”

Through analyzing his experiments with and theories about sound effects we will see that they hold a central position in his theory of radio art aesthetics. The process of a sound effect event combines the verbal and non-verbal, the textual and acoustic, the linguistic and musical to create a new expression and is therefore a microcosm for all expressive moments in radio art. This commingling of noise and meaning – the dance of the sound and sense – is at the heart of intense

---

275 Norman Corwin, interview by author, 18 June 2008, Los Angeles.
radio listening. Sound effect analysis urges us to employ and examine two of the most critical concepts in radio art: radiophonic and radiogenic. These important terms have been in use since the early twentieth century to discuss radio as a sound phenomenon and art. We will begin by defining them.

**Radiophonic**

Radiophonic has come generally to stand for sound from or for radio.\(^{276}\) Because of its generality and finality, the term radiophonic is a foundational concept in radio art theory. Radiophonics are what radio listeners experience in their ears.

**Radiogenic**

Radiogenic differs from radiophonic in that it involves aesthetics. Radiogenic implies the successful synthesis of sounds and ideas towards an engaging radio experience.\(^{277}\) As an aesthetic ideal, it is a fancy way of saying “good radio.” Radiogenic sometimes refers to a practice, technology, or theory that has been created because of radio, without any critical insinuation, but much more often radiogenic is an accolade. When attributed to a radio artist or to works of radio art, it is almost an audio version of the term photogenic. The best definition I have found is by Margaret Fisher in her 2009 essay “Futurism and Radio.” She wrote that radiogenic refers to “material particularly suited to the social and acoustic properties of [radio] or that which

---

\(^{276}\) Although one BBC composer stated, “it’s a bit like Humpty-dumpty, it means anything I want it to mean at the particular time.” Roger Limb, “Alchemists of Sound,” BBC Television Four, 2005.

\(^{277}\) In 1930, André Coeuroy in his book *Panorama de la Radio* defined “radiogenique” broadly as “qui trouve sa raison d’être et ses lois dans les caracteres specifiques de la radio [that which finds its reason for being and laws in the specific characteristics of radio].” However, Coueroy’s definition merely sets up the quest to define radiogenic without giving any specifics about what the characteristics of radio might be. André Coeuroy, *Panorama de la Radio* (Paris: Editions Kra, 1930), 8.
could suggest intellectual and sensorial experiences unique to radio.”

Fisher’s definition not only reflects the international usage of the term throughout the early twentieth century, but it also addresses an undeniable element of any cathartic radio experience – the dynamic synthesis of contrasting types of reception, which Fisher identifies with the dichotomies “social and acoustic” and “intellectual and sensorial.” These contrasting concepts both represent different aspects of the relationship between semantic and sonic experience in radio art. Each chapter of this thesis has approached semantics and sonics from different angles through Corwin’s work. In a way this entire thesis is an attempt to define radiogenic.

**Radiogenic Radiophonics: Corwin’s Theory and Practice**

Three of Corwin’s radio plays feature solid discussions of radiophonics, *Radio Primer*, *Seems Radio is Here to Stay*, and *Anatomy of Sound*, and will presently be discussed in depth. Yet Corwin never used the term radiophonic in print or interviews. He did say much about radio as sound though, and these comments are usually present during his discussions of sound effects. Corwin did use the term radiogenic. His first contact with the word was in 1939, and it prompted him to write a letter that was published in Time Magazine:

```
Sirs,

In TIME, Oct. 23, [1939] appears the phrase, “a radiogenic actor.” There will be a small fee of $.04 ($.05 in Canada) for each use of this word for the first ten times; the rate thereafter being $.03 per adjective. …

Norman Corwin
```

Despite his mockery, a few years later in notes to his published radio plays Corwin began to use “radiogenic” to represent aesthetic ideals of radio. He wrote that Henry Morgan “was the first completely radiogenic comedian of stature,” and when discussing a sound montage in one of

---


279 Norman Corwin, “Radiogenic,” *Time Magazine*, vol. 34, 1939, 12.
his programs produced at the BBC, he wrote “it was a moment of wry radiogenic humor.”

Later, he began to use radiogenic in interviews to sum up “the artistic end of radio” or to criticize the aesthetic successes and failures of certain radio plays.

The nuanced meaning of radiogenic is different for each radio artist, listener, or critic. Corwin’s network radio work was subsidized through CBS or the government – not sponsored via commercials – which allowed him to transcend in many ways the “stultifying ‘laws’ which guide[d] mainstream radio” and create radio art which interested him. This makes the radio art that came out of his experimental playground the best definition of Corwin’s radiogenic ideal. His radio plays were unabashed personal statements, even when his role was documentarian. For instance, Good Heavens (1941) explored his fascination with astronomy and projected his hope that congruent expansions of the societal psyche would follow expansions of scientific knowledge. Daybreak (1941) reveled in the universal experience of sunrise and used it as an opportunity to express his convictions toward universal brotherhood. Even the most blatant anti-fascist propaganda found in the This is War series were honest expressions of Corwin’s politics, ethics, and anger.

Still, one theme unites all of his radio work – an introverted fascination with radio’s potential as an art. Many times this fascination involved breaking down the “fourth wall” of radio drama such the cold open of Seem Radio is Here to Stay: “Do we come on you unaware, your [radio] set untended?”

Examples where Corwin declared that a radio broadcast was

---

happening are plentiful, and they are generally transparent moments that display his creative process. A few of his radio plays, where radio itself is the subject, contain lengthy sections of this raw transparency. In these works he addressed his passion for radiophonics directly. *Seems Radio is Here to Stay* and *Radio Primer* are two examples. *Radio Primer* was a farce of the radio business and radio genres of the day, rife with personal likes and dislikes. Contrastingly, *Seems Radio* focused on the mechanics of radio production and writing, vacillating between grandiose and glib behind the scene vignettes, and steeped in histrionic narration. Both *Seems Radio* and *Radio Primer* give valuable insights into Corwin’s ideas on the political and social importance of radio and his proclivities toward contemporary radio art production, but only briefly in both plays is there discussion of radiophonics, Corwin’s radiogenic theories, or the creative process in radio art composition. Yet these short moments, both during sections about sound effects, are extremely insightful, and reveal that Corwin approached larger concepts in radio art through sound effect theory.

In *Radio* (1936), Rudolf Arnheim wrote, “as an object sounds does it move and change. It is just those changes that are so particularly instructive, alike when we want to get our bearings in practical life, and when we want to take cognizance of what happens in a work of art. It is above all what is happening that matters most for us.”284 A line in *Radio Primer* (1941) humorously makes the same point: “A killer is a man with a gun, because if he didn’t have a gun nobody could hear him kill.”285 Sound effects are heard on a basic cognitive level and at the same time imbued with charged meaning through their context, and in both Corwin’s and Arnheim’s statements the sound effect is used to make general comments on radiophonics because listeners experience this fact. Sound effects force attention both on naked sound and more complex semantics in a condensed and catalytic way, which makes them useful to discussions of radiogenics. Take the simple sound of a woman walking in high heels in a radio drama. The

sound effect event is much more than a sound effects person, hand-deep in high heels, tapping on a wooden box. A woman exists in those sounds, and through the rhythm, she moves. Her body and mental state are established all in those steps. The whole radio play, a slew of symbols, ideas, impressions, dramaturgies, and cognitions, are drawn into that moment to invest those footfalls with meaning.

Sound effects are at first hearing the most mundane of all radio sound, but in their name is a simple equation: sound + effect = sound effect. A radio artist can combine sound and effect together in infinite ways for artistic expression. Lance Sieveking noticed how sound effects, as opposed to words and music, were new to radio art and forged new artistic ground. For this reason he called them the true “stuff of radio” and even “the radio of radio.” But the separate classification of a sound effect is primarily for the performance end of radio drama: actors speak, musicians play music, and sound effects personnel do all the rest. For the listener, the sound effect can fall somewhere between music and words. Sound effects carry blatant or latent meaning, but they do so with sounds that are expressive in a way more abstract than human speech, which unavoidably carries utterance, and less abstract than the traditional mood role of incidental instrumental music.

Corwin’s radio play *Seems Radio* also contains an exposition of sound effects. Three sound effect sequences form a short section introduced bluntly: “You wish some sound effects? Let this instruct your curiosity: *In with hoofbeats.*” After we hear hoof beats someone asks, “Now what is this?” The narrator replies, “a horseman of Apocalypse.” This explanation retroactively gives the sounds a specific meaning, allowing us to remember the sound in a new context.²⁸⁷

---


Both Samuel Beckett in his radio play *Embers* and Tom Stoppard in *Artist Descending a Staircase* feature hoof beats in a similar way which draws attention to sound effect usage. In
The next sound effect example is anticipated and prepared with an introduction. Notice how the words “hear” and “give an ear” direct the listener towards auditory anticipation:

Narrator: Now would you hear the bravest bird in all the world?

Interrupter: How’s that again?

Narrator: Here is a bird who talks right back to thunder: Give an ear!

Sound: *Great clap of thunder. Bird box triumphant at the end of reverberation.*

The third example is deceptive and combines anticipatory and retroactive techniques. The narrator introduces the sound of the biggest waterfall in the world, but only a slosh is heard:

Sound: *Feeble stirring of water tank.*

Narrator: Oh, shame!

Oh, shame,
Niagara trickles like three drops of rain
Which have joined forces down a windowpane!
What fell anemia is this?
What drouth has been at work on you?
Alas, alas, Niagara!

These three examples are good introductions to temporal placement of semantic completion in the unfolding of a sound effect event. The narrator prompts the listener to listen forward, then listen backward, and then to frame a sound effect in directional listening. This is the extent of direct sound effect discussion in *Seems Radio*, but this radio play along with *Radio Primer* establish that Corwin’s discussions of sound effects have much larger implications for his aesthetics of radio art. Another radio play presented as a mock scientific essay on the properties of sound, *Anatomy of Sound* (1941) is entirely dedicated to radio sound effects.

*Anatomy of Sound*, the eighteenth program of Corwin’s series 26 by Corwin (May-November 1941), is a self-proclaimed “treatise for solo voice.” Like the other pieces he wrote

---

289 Ibid., 230-231.
in this series, he conceived, wrote, rehearsed, and performed it in a few days. It has a different
tone than any other of his radio plays because it is the only Corwin radio play with a female
narrator and because of its unique construction. 291 On September 4, 1941, Corwin examined the
sound department of radio station KNX in Hollywood, and he took an inventory of the manual
and recorded sound effects available. He also experimented with listening to records at different
speeds and frequencies. He had an idea for a radio play about sound that would showcase sound
effects. He wrote it specifically for the actress Gale Sondergaard; hers was the only voice in the
radio play which required “eight microphones, four sound men, 32 live effects, 21 recorded
effects, 63 distinct cues, and the patience of two saints.” 292 Corwin directed Sondergaard, who sat
alone at a table with a microphone surrounded by a forest of sound effect implements,
microphone cables, and sound men.

Experimentation with sound effects was not generally encouraged during Corwin’s
network radio career. Writing in 1939, Max Wylie noted:

Sound is a technique but not an art, a creature of mechanics; and in the vast fleet of
radio’s dramatic realities, sound will always be a tugboat, pushing and puffing at the
heavier cargo of script. 293

Corwin once admitted, “my methods of writing are a glowing example of what to avoid,” and
went so far as to give a negative commandment about sound experimentation. 294 He advised,
“don’t try to show how much you know about radio writing by ordering a forest of microphones
in the studio, or specifying elaborate sound routines.” 295 This is exactly what he ordered for

Anatomy of Sound. Perhaps he was just being humble, as he considered preening, “a form of low-

290 Norman Corwin, More by Corwin (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, 1944),
234.

291 As we have seen in the chapter “Continuity and Content: The Innards of Radio,”
Corwin’s narration is one of his most definitive stamps in his radio plays, a vehicle for a stylized
version of his voice. The female narrator in Anatomy of Sound creates distance between narration
and Corwin’s typical radio poet voice giving the work an almost clinical sound.

292 Ibid., 249.


294 Norman Corwin, “Re Me,” in Off Mike; Radio Writing by the Nation’s Top Radio

295 Ibid., 53.
grade narcissism,” but to deny experimentation with sound in radio art is to limit severely artistic expression in the medium.\textsuperscript{296} Sound in Corwin’s milieu was confined to a narrow space – the sound effect – and Corwin composed \textit{Anatomy of Sound} to imagine sound out of that prison. Trevor Wishart, an electroacoustic composer and an author, wrote that when sonic artists are “freed of narrow preconceptions concerning the boundaries of artistic discourse, [they] may focus or defocus, manipulate, confuse or extend any or all of these levels of perception.”\textsuperscript{297} This is exactly the atmosphere of \textit{Anatomy of Sound}. Similarly, Gregory Whitehead wrote,

\begin{quote}
Radio happens in sound, but I don’t believe that sound is what matters about radio, or any of the acoustic media. What does matter is the play among relationships: between bodies and antibodies, hosts and parasites, pure noise and irresistible fact, all in a strange parade, destination unknown, fragile, uncertain. Once you make the shift from the material of sound to the material of the media, the possibilities open to infinity, and things start getting interesting again.\textsuperscript{298}
\end{quote}

Although Corwin repeatedly uses the term “sound” in \textit{Anatomy of Sound}, in most instances he actually means radio sound – the material of radiophonics. He admitted that “because sound is a very complicated subject” as a treatise on sound in general \textit{Anatomy of Sound} fails.\textsuperscript{299} As a treatise on radiophonics, however, it stands out as one of the most apolitical, enlightening, and direct works on the subject by one of America’s most important early radio artists.

Corwin actually uses the same tactic over and over in \textit{Anatomy of Sound} approaching it from different angles in each section of the radio play. The basic procedure involves the narrator elaborately contextualizing sound effects, giving them connotations before, while, and after they are heard. Typical radio sound effects give realism and verification to actions established through words and plot, but in this radio play there is a reversal of roles as Corwin foregrounded the experience of sound effects instead letting them float by. Consequently, he threw off any pretense of plot, focusing on vignettes that anatomicize the sound effect process by romanticizing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 50.
\item \textsuperscript{298} Gregory Whitehead, “Radio Play is No Place: A Conversation between Jerome Noetinger and Gregory Whitehead,” \textit{The Drama Review}, vol. 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 96.
\item \textsuperscript{299} Norman Corwin, interview by author, 18 June 2008, Los Angeles.
\end{itemize}
basic performance practices and stock uses of sound effects. His theory of radio sound effects in *Anatomy of Sound* reflects that just as all diverse elements are funneled into a single stream in a radio broadcast, the sound effect does this on an atomic scale. He sets up the sound effect both as a technique of immense radiogenic potential and as a theoretical microcosm for all radiogenic radiophonics.

Corwin’s stated aim for *Anatomy of Sound* was “to surround noises with a variety of concepts – some light and general, others sober and particular.” After a short introduction, Corwin seems to be ticking off a list of stock sound effects he found in the KNX sound department as he traces a day in the life of a Manhattan resident through sound effects of doors, dishes, trains, footsteps, bells, etc. This narrated montage is listenable, but rather unimpressive until it morphs into a series of whistles made, by various degrees, romantic through narration.

A factory whistle mundanely starts the montage. Next a “freight whistle, in distant perspective” blows, but it is given supplemental descriptions – it is night, the locomotive has a number, a dispatch officer in Toledo is hearing the sound. Next a passenger train whistle punctuates the silence and reminds a woman of a night in her youth spent outdoors with a lover. It is “a matter of association – or of escape,” the narrator explains, how each whistle becomes more romantic through imaginative exploration. The next whistle has a veritable poem spoken about it:

*Locomotive whistle…continuing under:*

That’s the kind of sound Tom Wolfe would write seven chapters about – the kind which wakes you up at night with a dim recollection of things seen long ago, or with a prophecy of places yet to come. That’s the sound of a night train – busy, alone, in a hurry, a sasser-back at bridges and crossings – a whistler in the dark, yet unafraid.

---

301 Ibid., 237.
303 Ibid., 238.
A train whistle does not necessarily communicate all those ideas, but when imagination and the experience of a sound combine, a more complex sound is created out of simpler one. This same technique is found in literature without the gratification of physically hearing the sounds. Corwin points in the introduction of Anatomy of Sound how imaginary sound worlds exist in poems and novels. If a poet describes or even mentions a bell ringing, then some sort of auditory imagination is required to make sense of this text. Sondegaard’s voice declares that without sound, the poets would have never “carried on about armies clashing by night, or about the tintinnabulation of the bells, bells, bells…” She continues, “what would it have availed friends, Romans, and countrymen to lend their ears?” Literature and poetry are full of sound effect cues, cues for the auditory imagination.

Silence

As if he has exhausted the limits of actual sound, Corwin then details how even silence can carry internalized action, obscured action, thought, or muted emotion in the auditory imagination. This section of Anatomy of Sound consists of improvisations on three ideas about silence: its dramatic uses, its existence as a radiophonic event, and its impossibility. On this last idea, Sondergaard says “in radio, as in music, silence has dimension. It is scored and charted on stopwatches and instruments,” but a radio experience or any aural experience is never truly silent. Even the deaf hear “hums and pulses,” and someone shut in a sound proof room would still hear “their own breathing and the beating of their hearts.” The “grave’s” silence is the only true silence, “profound, inscrutable, surpassing anything the living ear can testify to having

---

304 Ibid., 234.
305 Ibid.
307 Ibid., 239.
Composer John Cage, for whom Corwin had a grudging respect, came to the same conclusion seven years after the broadcast of *Anatomy of Sound* when he visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Expecting silence, he instead heard his nervous system and blood circulating. After the experiment he noted, “try as we may to make silence, we cannot… Until I die there will be sounds.” Both Cage and Corwin make the important point that silence is more of an idea than a living experience, and that silence is a suspension of reality in which the listener must actively be involved. Corwin therefore writes that each silence, far from having the same characteristics, has “a different time and place and character … a timbre even.”

To lighten the mood, Corwin then sarcastically demonstrates dramatic silences. He begins with the kind of silence that comes when a baby has been crying all night and then finally stops, “a welcome, and-stay-a-while, will you? silence.” He then continues that the most welcome silence known to man is when a dentist’s drill stops. This section also features a little melodrama featuring a cast of Boris Karloff (as a conveniently silent monster), a screaming damsel, and a mute hero. This tiny radio play exhibits several types of electrifying silences.

Corwin also explored tense, eerie, embarrassing, and understanding silences, the last being when two people in love stare at each other without speaking. In this section, he points out over and over how silence can in its emptiness be full of expression, a sound effect which is theoretically all effect and no sound.

---

308 Ibid., 239.

Cage most likely was familiar with Corwin’s work. He listened to the *Columbia Workshop* and composed the score to the radio play *The City Wears a Slouch Hat* (1942) which aired shortly after the run of Corwin’s *26 by Corwin* on the *Columbia Workshop* program.


To end his meanderings, Corwin performed a radio silence for its own sake. Enamored with the basic technology of radio waves, he writes that radio silence whips “around the world at the speed of light – cutting through the tangled ethers of the globe,” and “little whirlpools and eddies of silence play on every rooftop in America.”

He demonstrates this idea with nine seconds of dead air. After the silence, he notes, “Nine seconds don’t seem long in casual pursuits, but in a radio studio they amount, roughly, to forty years.” Artificial, intentional, and extended silence experienced by multitudes simultaneously is a rare radio art practice, but these silences and Corwin’s nine second silence give us an idea of the power of silence – momentarily stopping the relentless signal – in such a noisy medium.

Silence is also featured in the Futurist manifesto La Radia, a document that was meant to craft a futurist approach to radio art, and its ideas are echoed in the silence section in Anatomy of Sound. The futurists’ eighteenth tenant states “La Radia shall be the delimitation and geometric construction of silence.” “Delimitation” is exactly what happens in a sound effect event when a sound object is surrounded by various concepts that guide its purpose and expressiveness.

Corwin went to great length in this section to set up silence as a sound effect. The futurist’s “geometric construction of silence” is paralleled in Corwin’s ideas of radio silence as acoustic performance. He is aware that he is constructing silences in the electromagnetic ether and acoustic spaces of his audience. As an sound object to delimitate and construct, silence is therefore the ultimate theoretical extreme of the radio sound effect. It is a deficit of sound, totally

--

314 Ibid., 243.
315 Radio silence is rarely presented with this frame, but following the death of radio inventor Gugliemo Marconi (1874-1937) hundreds of radio stations world wide aired two minutes of silence. Similarly, the BBC broadcast silence on the eve of the death of Britain’s King George V (1865-1936), interrupted only by short updates on the king’s condition. “Here was consummate radio art, the height of elegiac invention,” wrote Margaret Fisher who referred to the event as “the royal silence.” Margaret Fisher, Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas; The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 61.
defined by its surroundings, and a zenith of uniform consistency, an all-pervading pure tone, in its own space and time.

Radio Space

So far we have seen how Corwin developed the idea that phonetic qualities of sound can carry complex meanings through textual, dramatic, and radiophonic context. But as he displays through his nine second silence, Corwin was also interested in exploring the spaces that the audience occupied. Sondergaard’s voice opens the radio play: “How would you like to get up before an audience of five million people and introduce yourself?” She explains how there is no guarantee she will have anyone’s attention. The listeners of radio have their own environmental sounds and ideas mixed with radio. Of the five million people listening to her voice, thousands may be playing cards, riding in cars, reading books, or talking amongst themselves. One poignant line emphasizes the expanse of the audience: “I cannot see 246,197 cigarettes light up in the dark across eight million square miles of continent.” While Sondergaard’s character constantly refers to her own experience of performing on radio in a studio, she also focuses for a moment on the places where the audience hears her voice. Many radio art scholars refer to these indeterminate locations of audition as a single collective space called ‘radio space.’

Radio space is “all the places radio is heard,” according to Robert Adrian’s treatise, *Toward a Definition of Radio Art.* Radio space is to radio what the concert hall is to an orchestra or the art gallery is to paintings. But broadcasting has no control over these spaces. Christian Sheib writes that this indeterminacy is, “pure constructivism of the aesthetic: every

---


318 Ibid., 233.

radio art listener hears a different piece, unchangeably, and everyone creates their own final version from a framework of possibility.”" Not only does the listener bring memories, preconceptions, and a specific physiology, but she brings the noises, acoustic spaces, and simultaneous situations of her life. Radio art weaves into the life of the audience, a feature that certainly attracted Corwin to the medium. But it is shaky conceptual territory, and Corwin did not spend much time in Anatomy of Sound (or indeed any of his radio art or writing) focusing on the indeterminacy of experience or final acoustic states of radio art. After this short introduction, he shifted the focus firmly to the radio space on his side of the microphone.

In one of Anatomy of Sound’s vignettes, Corwin draws the concept of radio space backwards through the loudspeaker to emphasize the origination of radio sound. This little montage takes the listener on a fictional tour of the globe. Some sounds heard along the way are Niagara Falls, a swimming pool in Hollywood, a volcano in Hawaii, a kookaburra in Australia, and a ritual in the Belgian Congo. In the notes to Anatomy of Sound, he expressed regret at not being able to use the actual sounds on location and reveals a larger theme throughout his radio art that deals directly with radio space.

Corwin’s conception of radio space extends back through the radio set to his presence in the radio studio behind a microphone. This directly contradicts the second tenant of Adrian’s Toward a Definition of Radio Art: “Radio happens in the place it is heard and not in the production studio.” Corwin’s differing conception of radio art came from an artistic struggle against his medium. Radio could be heard all across the world. Mountains, oceans, and deserts could not stop radio waves. Yet this spatial freedom was limited to the reception spaces of radio – to the radio sets. During most of Corwin’s radio career he was anchored physically to a radio

---

321 Norman Corwin, More by Corwin (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 243-244.
322 Robert Adrian, Toward a Definition of Radio Art, in Daniel Gilfillan, “Networked Radio Space and Broadcast Simultaneity,” in Re-Inventing Radio; Aspects of Radio as Art, ed. Heidi Grundmann (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2008), 212.
station, yet he yearned for his side of the radio apparatus to reflect the spatial freedom of radio reception. He wanted to go around the world to capture sounds for radio art transmission, equalizing the spatial freedom at both ends of radio broadcasting.

This desire is reflected in many of his radio plays based entirely on sound gathered from constant movement or extreme locations. *El Capitan and the Corporal* and *The Lonesome Train* are train travelogues, the first a love story that takes place on the titular train which followed the Santa Fe route from Los Angeles to Chicago, and the second, *The Lonesome Train*, follows President Lincoln’s dead body from Washington DC to burial in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois. *The Log of the R-77* takes place in the dark of a wrecked submarine deep in the ocean. *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease* follows the air raids of a bomber airplane, while also visiting locations of destruction. *Daybreak* parallels an airplane at perpetual sunrise swooping down to hear various scenes that occur at sunrise beneath the pilot and his machine. In *Odyssey of Runyon Jones*, a young boy travels through metaphysical space and visits mythological places looking for his dead dog. *The Undecided Molecule* takes place on a molecular level following the coming of age of a single molecule. *Soliloquy to Balance the Budget* perhaps is the most imaginative use of space without forfeiting the idea of location. This radio play is a psychological and physiological journey through Corwin’s mind and body showing how he saw the “unknown expanses of the psyche” as regions for radiophonic exploration.\(^{323}\)

These examples give the illusion of novel radio origin spaces, but Corwin also used technology to achieve these ends. Remote pickups, in use since the early twenties, allowed multiple radio studios at different stations as well as the telephone system to transport the physical sounds of radio art from location to location. Corwin’s most ambitious use of remote pickups was his *Word from the People* (1945), which he wrote and organized for the United

Nations summit in San Francisco. Locations included pickups from six continents as well as over a dozen in the United States. One of Corwin’s earliest use of remote pickup at CBS was in the So This is Radio (1939) series when we hear a young pianist in St. Louis, Missouri, talking and playing piano at his house. In these programs there is a sense of geographical interconnectedness, and the reality of the multiplicity of receiving sets across the nation is mirrored in the multiple locations.

But Corwin’s use of remote pickups and inventive fictional locations for his radio plays did not come close to the One World Flight series. This series physically freed him from the radius of the studio and the anchored leash of the microphone cable. In 1946, Corwin received the first Wendell Willkie One World Award, which included a free trip around the world. Corwin accepted on the condition that he be allowed to record sounds and interviews for a series of radio plays, resulting in a vast work of radio art using sounds and voices of the cities he visited, including artists, composers, leaders, laborers, and people on the streets. In this 37,000 mile travelogue, Corwin also collected ambient sounds of coasts, industrial sites, and street noise. All together, over one hundred hours of wire recordings became the source material for the thirteen half hour episodes of One World Flight.

All of Corwin’s escapades in spatial transmissional freedom were accompanied by a careful continuity of descriptions. The sound plus the words about the sound were needed to capture the spirit of the event. He even devised a whole show around this concept to capture the

324 Fernand Ouellette, in his biography of Edgard Varèse, describes a proposed work by Varèse, Espace, similar to Word from the People:

Varese had imagined a performance of the work being broadcast simultaneously in and from all the capitals of the world. The choirs, each singing in its own language, would have made their entries with mathematical precision. The work would have been divided up into seconds, with the greatest exactitude, so that the chorus in Paris – or Madrid, or Moscow, or Peking, or Mexico City, or New York – would have come onto the air at exactly the right moment. (Fernand Ouellette, Edgard Varèse [London: Calder & Boyars, 1973], 132.)
spirit of America through carefully recorded and described sounds.\footnote{325 Norman Corwin, memo to William B. Lewis from the private papers of Norman Corwin, 1940; quoted in R. LeRoy Bannerman, \textit{Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years} (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 51.} He communicated his idea in a memo to CBS’s William B. Lewis listing the sounds to be used:

A. The bells of the nation – the carillon of the Bok Peace Tower in Florida, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, a bell buoy off the coast of Maine, the bell of a community church in a prairie town, mission bells in California.

B. Arteries of the nation – the rush of traffic in the Holland Tunnel, steamship whistle in the Erie Canal, train pulling out of a station in Santa Fe, the noise of traffic across the Golden Gate Bridge.

C. The pulse of the nation – pick up mechanisms of great and little time pieces, including the wrist watch on Burgess Meredith’s wrist, the wheels humming inside the biggest clock in the country, the clicking meter inside a Chicago traffic light control.

D. The energy of the nation – a giant dynamo in the Manhattan power house, water pouring over Boulder Dam, a steam turbine inside a locomotive cabin in Kansas City, a diesel engine aboard an ocean liner on the west coast, the throb of an airplane engine over Buffalo.\footnote{326 Ibid. 51.}

But what would this impressive collection of sounds be without accompanying descriptions? The radio show that Corwin describes is essentially a series using \textit{Anatomy of Sound} as a template; it would have been a series of sound effects. The reality – the radiogenic expressivity – of these sounds depends on accompanying description. Playing the naked sounds, unaccompanied by any continuity, makes them radiophonically expressive. But to make them radiogenically expressive the basic elements of the sound effect event are needed: sound plus surrounding context.

\section*{Electroacoustic Manipulation}

In most of \textit{Anatomy of Sound}, sound effects are heard as if the narrator has summoned them out of the air. But once in the silence section Corwin exposes the technology. He plays a recorded track of a quiet country night first in “normal perspective” and then amplifies the sound so that “the crickets fairly shriek,” resulting in straightforward attention to the use of record discs,
turntables, and amplifiers. This move also reinforces Corwin’s point that silence is subjective, but does so through a particular piece of machinery. Audio machines, like microphones and phonograph players, are not passive but rather active instruments capable of subtle and extreme artistic expression. In the final section of *Anatomy of Sound*, Corwin continues to develop this concept, focusing on phonography and microphony in radio art.

This focus on the microphone and phonograph is another way Corwin emphasizes the radio artist’s creative space and process. He combines the same types of descriptive techniques used in the rest of the radio play with simple electroacoustic manipulations, shifting semantics and sonority. Part of Corwin’s research for *Anatomy of Sound* was playing with records in the sound effects library at KNX. He found that slowing down one recording of an applauding crowd sounded like a windstorm. Augmenting another crowd recording produced waves on a shore. He accompanied these two sound processes with poetic narration. As the first crowd transforms into a gale, Sondergaard’s calm voice leaves pauses for the wind to blow as she says, “Wind … a wind of people’s voices, blowing in a mighty chorus … a wind that can become a hurricane … a wind to topple tyrants, ripping out their tangled roots … a wind of protest, of determination, of vindication.” The second crowd noise, as it slows, it melts into the ebb and flow of a seashore, and the symbolism shows humanity becoming a strong and peaceful force, like “surf booming in the night – eternal, like the sea itself. Here is the tide of humanity, sweeping from pole to pole; here re-enacts the restless drama of renewal, the charge of wave and wave and wave and wave upon the planetary shores.” Corwin found within these stock sound effect discs hidden sonic universes waiting for discovery, the disc grooves were distant valleys for his auditory imagination to explore with the tools of the turntable.

\[329\] Ibid.
Corwin similarly used microphone levels and placements along with textual descriptions to transform sounds. The heartbeat of the sound effects man, Alfred Span, is made to sound like “far off drums in Africa” through a contact microphone on his chest. Chewing on celery when the microphone is on the cheek sounds “positively thunderous” Corwin notes in the sound cue for this effect.  

Here Corwin foreshadows the scholarship of the important media theorist Marshall McLuhan, whose basic premise was that technologies and media are extensions of ourselves, physically and psychologically. Corwin romanticizes the microphone, carrying its functions to aesthetic extremes:

Man’s amplifying ear will hear the respiration of the tadpole, count dust-motes as they knock against his pillow in the night, awake in winter to the thud of snowflakes on the roof. The very air, when tranquil, will disclose new harmonies; the clash of kissing lips make towers totter and suspension bridges sway like birches in the wind.

Francis Jehl, assistant to Thomas Edison, responded with similar poetic imagery to his early microphone experiments:

The passage of a delicate camel’s hair brush was magnified to the roar of a mighty wind. The footfalls of a tiny gnat sound like the tramp of Rome’s cohorts. The ticking of a watch could be heard over a hundred miles.

John Cage also waxed poetic about microphones and imagined hearing “the music the spores shot off from basidia make,” and, “sounds like ants walking in the grass.”

Corwin’s little electroacoustic manipulations are similar to the radiophonic experiments of composer Pierre Schaeffer. His La Coquille à Planètes (composed throughout the 1940s but broadcast in 1948) was a radio opera broadcast in eight one-hour segments. It included many

---

330 Ibid., 247.
333 Francis Jehl, Menlo Park Reminiscences (Dearborn, MI: Edison Institute, 1937), 140.
novel sound effect sequences placed in a “literary, dramatic, somewhat surrealistic context.”

His motivations were similar to those of Corwin’s. Schaeffer wrote that he began the project,

[without] any other thought than of composing a series of studies, without preconceived subject, without literary concern, with the sole aim of giving me in different allures, from slowing down to speeding up, from simple to the complex, opportunities for demonstrating radiophonic mechanisms, I was obliged to gradually enter into a subject whose inspiration was imposed as it were at each instant, of which the episodes were suggested to me by instrumental requirements.

He also wrote that while composing La Coquille,

I was suddenly aware that the only mystery worthy of interest is concealed in the familiar trappings of triviality. And I noticed without surprise by recording the noise of things one could perceive beyond sounds, the daily metaphors that they suggest to us.

Corwin and Schaeffer at a similar time were doing similar experiments, one in a radio studio in Hollywood and one at a radio studio in Paris, involving sound effects with descriptive narratives. Both were concerned with the poetry of everyday sounds and used the instruments at their disposals to create, as Schaeffer put it, “radiophonic mechanisms” combining text and sound. Schaeffer even did a smaller radio piece, Etude aux chemins de fer (1948), which includes the slowing down discs just like in Anatomy of Sound, “transforming [train] sounds into those of a blast furnace.”

Although radio art was still an element of his composition for some time, Schaeffer soon became fully engrossed with electroacoustic musical composition and became one of the most important composers of the twentieth century. And although Corwin continued in radio art, he also imagined the implications of radiophonics on future musical composition.

When looking at the Anatomy of Sound original script we see that during the writing of this radio play, Corwin may have struggled with marking the boundaries between radio art and

---

music. Initially he positioned radiophonics on the same lattice but on a much lower tier as the established canon of Western symphonic music. He wrote, “Now, you may have noticed that this treatise hasn’t touched upon the matter of music, which certainly comes under the heading of sound.” The remainder of this quote is crossed out in the original script:

That’s because we think music bears the same relation to sound as the brain to the body – it’s another program, another time, another station. But there can be no serious quarreling when we say, in our own self-assured manner, that the noblest of all arts is the putting together of sounds and tones in such a wise as to make symphonic music.  

In this crossed out portion Corwin downplays radio art’s artistic placement, but perhaps he omitted this section because he blatantly and complimentarily compares radio art to music later in the radio play. This uncertainty betrays a struggle to compare his work to the larger field of the audio arts, namely the Western Art Canon. He opens the final section of Anatomy of Sound with a clear statement of his aesthetic goal:

Ah, well (change of subject), we have a platform regarding sound. Let it, like music, captivate the sense by metaphoric utterance, by mood-stuff and far-ranging concepts. Let it say things in terms of other things, dissolve and modulate and set up new vibrations in the chambers of imagination.

In a practiced simile, he simply declares radio art is like music. He points out their overlapping qualities, making just as much a point about music as radio art. He hints at a new horizon for musical composition, which he had glibly encapsulated earlier in Anatomy of Sound: “There are more whistles in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horowitz!” This Shakespearian twist was addressed to Horatio originally, and Sondergaard read it this way. But later Corwin crossed out Horatio and penciled in Horowitz, so that the 1944 published radio play

342 Ibid., 238.
reflects this change. Thus the simple mis-quote becomes a statement about contemporary musical arts. The philosophy of pianist Vladimir Horowitz plainly represents the traditional view that music is made of sounds arranged for musical instruments. The expansion of the pianist’s philosophy involves a widening of the musical palette and an awareness of the musicality of all significant sounds. Analogous ideas are common throughout twentieth century musical thought and also show up in early radio scholarship. Sieveking boldly makes the claim for this expanded musicality as applied to radio:

… the radio dramatist and the musician are dealing only with things to be heard: the radio dramatist having by far the greater orchestra to write for (since he is not limited to what are generally accepted as “musical instruments”) and an infinitely larger field of tone, pitch, volume, timbre, and general character of sound, for he deals not only in words, not only in music, but in every sound in the world which may be taken in its original form, or imitated; which may be used realistically or in some abstract way.

It is the microphone, and playback technology like the phonograph, which allow this new musical possibility, and Corwin romanticized this potential in Anatomy of Sound.

In his personal life music was a constant comfort. “When I’m bemused by work itself and wonder what the hell I’m on earth for. I pace up and down here [in his New York City apartment] and listen…” Again he wrote, “I am fired by music. A slug of Shostakovich or Beethoven or Brahms has helped me over many a hurdle on a tough night, and I don’t know what I’d do without a phonograph.” He was also fervent about music’s ability to cross cultural divides and help promote peace.

That radio artists can better humanity was not only Corwin’s idea. Radio art brings people together as they experience the same sound simultaneously, and some believed that radio could create a world were people had a deeper capacity to imagine and that this depth would

---

345 Norman Corwin quoted in “Meet Norman Corwin,” Production Men June 18, 1944, 15.
result in increased understanding and worldwide empathy. In 1928, the French radio artist Paul Deharme wrote in his “Propositions for a Radiophonic Art” that the radio-film (his term for radio play) can incite “the pleasures of the imagination in those whose spirit is imprisoned in a dangerous material activity,” an idea analogous to Corwin’s, “…and set up new vibrations in the deepest chambers of imagination.”347 And it is in the context of radio art’s altruistic potential that Anatomy of Sound ends.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the same theme from different angles: the theory that moments of charged radio listening involve collapsing the distance between visceral hearing and involved imagination. Sounds heard next to each other or at the same time converge to form new expressions. The important theoretical terms radiophonic and radiogenic reflect this convergence. Radiophonic encapsulates all words, music, or other sounds on radio. Radiogenic denotes the successful synthesis of semantics and sound toward engaging radiophonic experience for an audience. These specialized terms are important because they reveal the existence of a specific radio aesthetic, which in turn demands to be defined. Corwin employed the term radiogenic and in his radio plays, if we are sensitive, we can hear his explanations of this concept. Briefly in Radio Primer and Seems Radio is Here to Stay and at length in Anatomy of Sound Corwin used sound effects to demonstrate these explanations. In Anatomy of Sound, he repeatedly exhibited how a sound can be affected through surrounding contexts, and conversely how sound effects are completions of those surroundings. Radio space, or the collective places where radio is heard on both sides of the radio set, is a major theme in Corwin’s oeuvre and also addressed in Anatomy of Sound through sound effects. Again, radio space involves the uniting of separate locations into a single conceptual space, and through sound effect events sounds and

silences become more than acoustics, rather they condense, embody, or, in a sense, consume their surrounding contexts through radiogenic expression.

Louis Macneice wrote that all genres of radio programming “go through the same mill, i.e. into a microphone and out the other end through a wireless set.” In the end, no matter what goes into a radio broadcast it all comes down to a signal on a wire. Art and technology converge; every new improvement with sound quality, mobility, and accessibility increase expressive potential. People (bodies, voices, and trained hands) and mechanism (leagues of wires, forests of towers spanning continents, an increasing number of satellites, and millions upon millions of microphones, loud speakers, headphones, and mobile devices) all “arranged to a hair in a fulminating order” become a single medium.

Corwin constructs one more radiogenic radiophonic moment to end Anatomy of Sound. The entire radio play is a series of experiments, and this final one uses the microphone and amplifier circuit physically and metaphorically. The event is constructed simply: three paragraphs of preparation and anticipation are completed with a single, brief sound. Corwin spent the whole radio play explaining and reinforcing the concept of a sound effect event, and with this final sound effect he let his politics and personal philosophy meld with this concept. The text prepares the listener for a sound that will embody the potential of radio art’s ability to create peace on earth, and the sound, a roar of thunder, symbolically accomplishes that effect. Gale Sondergaard’s voice rises in volume and energetic sincerity degree by degree as she describes a thunderclap that will amplify goodness itself and cleanse the earth of all war. The completion of the sound effect event is a moment of atomic radiogenic release:

349 A single wire for Corwin’s entire network career and two wires with the introduction of FM stereo. Theoretically, in custom construction any number of channels can be added.
Now if celery can sound like thunder, what can thunder sound like? A blast, no doubt, to shake down half the stars from heaven! Man’s amplifying ear will hear the respiration of the tadpole, count dust-motes as they knock against his pillow in the night, awake in winter to the thud of snowflakes on the roof. The very air, when tranquil, will disclose new harmonies; the clash of kissing lips make towers totter and suspension bridges sway like birches in the wind.

Will Truth be amplified one day? Will man’s humanity to man make joyful noises, shouting down the tyrant’s cannon? Will the handclasp of two honest men be louder than the clink of gold? Will song and laughter roll unmitigated down the soundways of the world?

How soon before the grosser sounds are banished from the hearing of the race? The venal cluck of greed, the roar of despotism, the bluster of the braggart? Shall bursting bombs cross-fade eventually to choruses announcing victory? Shall Independence’s cracked bell ring out again for all enslaved peoples? And the groaning of the persecuted rise to shouts of jubilation? . . . to the hallelujahs of a world made free?

An enormous clap of thunder, solemn and conclusive.\(^{351}\)

Five years later America dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. A few days after these attacks, on the evening of August 14, 1945, a “fistful of lines for a single voice, to be supported by a single sound effect” was broadcast.\(^{352}\) This was Corwin’s radio play, *August 14*, which commemorated the victory in Japan of the Allied Forces. It was broadcast from the KNX studio next door to the one where *Anatomy of Sound* was broadcast. Like *Anatomy of Sound*, it was for one voice, this time Orson Welles. But the sound effects department had a much easier job.

Corwin only wrote five sound cues into the radio play, each one a solitary canon shot commemorating the end of WWII. But these explosions must have sounded – and still sound – more foreboding than salutary, more like thunderclaps or atomic bomb blasts. A few days later, Corwin expanded the script and titled it *God and Uranium*. In a sad irony, the sound effect blasts for *August 14* were produced on a thunder-machine – maybe even the same machine as was used to close *Anatomy of Sound*.\(^{353}\) What for one radio play was a note of triumph became for the other a note of soberness, a reminder of the hundreds of thousands who had died that very week and millions others in the preceding years. Yet in both radio plays these blasts are moments of

---


\(^{353}\) Ibid., 507.
extreme radiogenic economy, hyperbolic sonic punctuations resounding with a depth of meaning that belies their brevity.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

To begin at the beginning: …

I introduced this thesis with a historical event and a claim. The event was radio’s first broadcast on Christmas Eve 1906 by Reginald Fessenden, and the claim was that by recognizing that this simple broadcast was radio art and a radio play we have the beginning of an inclusive and sensitive methodology necessary to do the last century of radio art justice. To call this simple broadcast radio art and a radio play requires encompassing definitions such as I give: ‘Radio art is any artistic activity which produces radio sound or affects how radio sound is heard.’ And for the radio play: “an isolatable event of radio art in sound created by an artist or group of artists.’

This encompassing methodology asserts that all genres of radio programming have artistic qualities, whether they are musical programming, religious proselytizing, journalism, talk radio, or works specifically labeled radio drama, radio plays, or radio art composed by notable writers, musicians, or other artists. Norman Corwin’s radio work reasserts an inclusive approach. The bulk of his individual works for radio, representing four years of experimentation in radio, were non-dramatic radio programs. These early series were poetry programs which presented poetry in various ways, from straightforward readings by Corwin to poems interspersed with evocative musical pieces, sound effects, and carefully composed continuity. Increasingly, he experimented with orchestrations of poems for multiple voices and composing snippets of radio drama into the the poems. These early examples deserve the title radio art and, a critic could

---

355 As I state in the introduction, radio’s first broadcast on Christmas Eve 1906, by Reginald Fessenden from Brant Rock, MA, was a short presentation featuring holiday greetings, recorded and live music, and a reading from the Bible. Short phrases opened the broadcast and introduced each work, and it ended with an invitation to ship operators (the only people with proper receivers) to listen again on New Years Eve.
justifiably analyze the individual episodes as radio plays, but Corwin’s later mature style also reflects eclectic techniques from a range of radio art genres.

His network radio career included a variety show, the series *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1939-40), innovative journalism with *One World Flight* (1947), complex treatments of poetry reminiscent of his earliest projects such as *American Trilogy* (1944), and documentaries such as *The Long Name None Could Spell* (1944), *Good Heavens* (1941), and *Anatomy of Sound*. He published many of these works under the title of radio drama, but they do not exactly fit the definition of traditional radio drama. Since most scholarship in radio art has been done on radio drama and for the most part the term radio play has been restricted to works of radio drama, where does this leave the most acclaimed radio writer of early American radio art, Norman Corwin? The solution is to broaden the scope of these foundational terms and employ increased sensitivity to artistic expression in all genres of radio art. This line of thinking is essential to a study of Corwin’s radio work and essential to answer the main questions posed by this thesis.

This study’s overarching question of is, ‘What insights into universal radio art concepts does a study of Corwin’s style give us?’ Each chapter highlights a fundamental aspect of radio art through Corwin’s practice and theory. The chapter “Nero’s Noël” addresses musicality and poetics. Corwin took his first steps as a radio artist with the most idealistic goal in mind, to honor the potential of radio by making it a worthy vessel for music and poetry. At first we see Corwin’s reluctance to outright mix music and words. Rather than practice voice over music, he spent years incorporating musical techniques into poetry, music into voice. Multi-voice arrangements, or verse choir, were one way to enhance the poetry, and so were simple sound effects that had their cues from sound imagery in the poems. With these enhancements to poetry Corwin crafted his first radio dramas. His decisions leading up to that point mirror the decisions every radio artist makes either through choosing a preexisting genre or creating one of his or her own – how

---

356 Radio works which use elements of scenic realism, i.e. dialogue, representational sound effects, and other narrative techniques, to tell a story.
to juggle sound and semantics – the idealized extremes of music and poetry of Corwin’s narrative vividly spotlight this important choice.

Chapter Three, subtitled “The Innards of Radio,” examines the continuity and content dynamic. However radio artists decide to express themselves, they will always do so in the system of continuity and content. Corwin’s early artistic development focuses on this dynamic and encourages sensitivity to the interplay between framing and featured elements. Context is central to radiophonic meaning, and, in radio, context is built in the listeners mind through various levels of continuity and content. What Corwin’s story tells us is that even the most functional continuity is an opportunity for artistic expression. Artistry in radio can extend to every sound, word, or musical note.

The fourth chapter, “Corwin, Composer,” addresses Corwin as a musician and composer. His musical activity gives us alternative examples of how music can be created through radio art. The overwhelming majority of all radio art is musical, and most of this is musical programming of prerecorded music. This has created an important symbiotic relationship between musical taste/commerce and radio art. What Corwin reveals however, is the opportunities for musical composition that are outside the domain of musical programming. He was an amateur musician and composer, and he did not separate this activity from his radio art creation, and shows us that, just as words are composed to enhance the hearing of music, music can be specially composed to enhance the hearing of words. In radio art, musical activity is inevitable yet sometimes only heard by sensitive ears. Corwin takes away the need for sensitivity, unleashing his compositional desires directly and frequently.

“Radiogenic Radiophonics: Dissecting the Sound Effect” deals with the anatomy of ‘charged radio listening.’ The goal of all purposeful radio art is to create moments of unalloyed communication, splicing wires between speaker and hearer, musician and audience, bell ringer and citizen. No matter the motive behind a broadcast, be it propaganda, advertisement, social activism, or religious proselytizing, the method is the same. Attention must be grabbed and a
message must be transmitted, and the medium often necessitates that this process be quick. That is why Corwin’s ideas and experiments with the sound effect are so helpful. Sound effects have great radiogenic potential, happening in a moment while carrying almost any effect imaginable. Incorporating discussions of radio space, radio silence, and electroacoustic machines Corwin repeatedly enacts the same equation, sound + effect = sound effect. He sets up the sound effect as a moment of completion, a reaction at an atomic level, revealing how radio catharsis is created through fusing together contrasting forms of listening into a single experience.

The secondary question posed by this thesis has to do with methodology, namely ‘What does musicology have to offer radio art analysis?’ This is a thesis in musicology dealing specifically with radio play analysis, and studies like this are uncommon because radio plays are usually approached through literary analytical techniques. Literary techniques have produced a myriad of excellent studies which analyze dramatic form, technique, and style in radio plays. Yet they do so with an incomplete set of tools if they do not also emphasize listening, acoustics, and the proximity to musical experience. This kind of sensitivity also brings us back to how we define radio art and radio play. If, as many scholars do, popular musical programming or disc jockeying is discounted as a radio art then the ramifications can extend to the way radio plays are analyzed. But complex interactions between music and words can be present in a disc jockey’s set as much as a Samuel Beckett radio play.

If we accept that musicology is an acceptable field to study radio art then the first step is to delineate basic parameters. I do this by isolating three separate musicological approaches:

First, to focus on instrumental and sung music within a radio play.

Second, to treat all sounds, including human phonation, sound effects, and sounds from musical instruments, as music.

And third, to analyze moments or larger structural examples of interplay between sonic and semantic elements.

All three approaches emphasize listening to recordings whenever possible alongside employing existing literary techniques, the best of which project a possible listening experience through
imaginative responses to radio scripts when no recording is available. This study hinges on a musicological vantage which led to the focus on music and poetry in Corwin’s early career, the progression of his continuity styles which framed those early experiments and later became his narration style, his prolific activity composing music through radio art, and the importance of sensual experience in intense radio listening.

Scholarship on early American radio art in general has made little inroads to international contemporary radio art studies, but Corwin’s name still has a glimmer of recognition. He made ripples at the BBC with his *American in England* (1942) series and was prominent and influential in late 1940s German radio when the nation’s stations were rebuilt after WWII. In America there is still active interest in his legacy. The *Third Coast International Audio Festival* awarded him its 2005 Audio Luminary Award. The organization Transom turned a special interview with Corwin into an edition of the *Transom Review*, an online journal dedicated to radio manifestos of practicing American radio artists. And multiple film documentaries have been made about him. In 1992, Ken Burns used interview footage of him to open and close the documentary *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio.* Two documentaries are portraits of him during his last years *The Poet Laureate of Radio of Radio: An Interview with Norman Corwin* and *A Note of Triumph: The Golden Age of Norman Corwin* which aired on HBO and won the Oscar for best documentary short subject in 2005.

Robert Krulwich, an American public radio producer and journalist, in his *Transom Review* manifesto, briefly mentions Corwin. Krulwich’s meandering statement is typical in its brief yet high praise. It reads:

---


358 *The Odyssey of Runyon Jones* was produced multiple times on German radio. Ibid., 54.

359 *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio*, produced by Ken Burns, written and directed by David Ossman (PBS Home Video, 1997), VHS.

And as for Corwin – I’m sure most of you reading this have no idea of who Norman Corwin is/was. But if you wanted a Homer in modern form … a lyrical reporter who wrote and spoke like he was wearing a toga and sometimes was so spectacular you’d get dizzy listening and sometimes seems a little too old fashioned and oratorical…

Quotes like these are flattering, yet tend to frame Corwin’s legacy in nostalgic terms. This may be because of the notion of “the Golden Age of Radio,” which is meant to honor early American radio art but also distances it from contemporary relevance. The finality of a golden age is essentially a gilded tombstone, complete with birth and death dates.

However, Corwin’s legacy resists bejeweled irrelevance. His ideas speak to radio artists of all eras. Music and poetry are still foundational elements of radio art. Radio continuity will continue to be churned out and silently to beg for artistic innovation. New musical opportunities in radio art will only grow as technology advances. And the crux of radio art aesthetics will always be devoted to defining the nuances of engaged listening. Many more studies like this present one are needed to find the artistry that is hidden beneath Corwin’s passion and, just as often, hidden in his humor. He wrote his own epitaph long before he died, and it is a supreme example of his ability to hide a poignant idea beneath visceral narrative and ironic romanticism:

Norman Corwin, aged 126, was killed yesterday in a duel with a jealous lover. His gun jammed.

Certainly he did not wish to be remembered quietly, but as a future facing thinker and passionate actor in the radio drama of the twentieth century.

---

Interviews with Author

Corwin, Norman. Interview by author, 12 November 2007, Los Angeles.

______. Interview by author, 18 June 2008, Los Angeles.

Films


Archival Collections

J. David Goldin Collection. Marr Sound Archives, University of Missouri/ Kansas City Miller Nichols Library.


Norman Corwin Papers, 1931-1967. Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

Theses and Dissertations


Journal Articles and Papers


Books


Corwin, Norman. *They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*. Weston: V. Orton, 1939.


VITA

Troy Augustus Cummings was born in Columbia, Missouri in the United States of America on September 5, 1981. He received a Bachelor of Music in Guitar Performance from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance in 2004 under the superb tutelage of Douglas Niedt.

Please contact me through the University of Missouri/Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance if you have questions or comments about my research.

Below is a picture of Norman Corwin and me at Corwin’s Los Angeles apartment in 2008. I am the one on the left.