

## Astraphony

Larry Polansky  
for the Astra choirscape  
2001

When John invited me to write a one-minute piece for Astra's half-centenary, I thought about all the concerts I'd done with them. What I remembered most was not so much the music, but the people involved — how each of them, in their own beautifully idiosyncratic ways, embraced my often strange and seemingly unconnected musical ideas.

John and I share an interest in Ruth Crawford Seeger's work, and she was interested in *heterophony* —people doing more or less the same thing together, at the same time, in their own ways. She wrote about a famous recording by a group of Texas convicts:

**"... two singers, singing the same tune simultaneously, may at certain points employ two levels of 'blueness' .... With a larger group, such as that in *Go Down, Ol' Hannah* this heterophony is striking"**

I asked Astra members to record this text. I deformed those recordings in time so that they last one minute. They read the text live at the same time, their readings also a minute long. The same text, the same time, many voices.

(LP, 9/16/01)

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### **Notes on the One Minute, Joan Pollock Version**

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When I received the recordings from Astra, back at the beginning of the summer, as a response to my one page "score," I realized that there had been a miscommunication, probably my fault. Astra interpreted my instructions to be less homologous, less self-referential than I had intended. They understood the score to mean "read the Ruth Crawford Seeger quote." I received around 20 lovely 15 second recordings of that quote, instead of the complete, one-minute description of the piece I had intended.

What the heck. I made over 200 computer transformations of those recordings, and told Astra that they could use these recordings in any combination with live performances of the one minute text or not. They could use the 200 soundfiles as an installation, performance, or any way they imagined, in any level of heterophony, and as many times and in as many ways as they wanted. I figured I was done.

But one Astra member had been missing from the recording session, because she had been travelling. Her name was Joan Pollock, a close friend from when we collaborated on curating a concert of my work in Melbourne some years ago (she did a number of beautiful and extraordinary things, and was wonderful to work with). In mid-summer, I got an email from Joan that she would be in New York City, on her way to Cincinnati to visit her son, and could she stop by in Lebanon and visit for a few days. She did, arriving here on Friday, Sept. 7, and on Monday, Sept. 10, the day before she was scheduled to leave (on Amtrak, the next morning, to NYC to catch a flight to Cincinnati), I recorded her speaking the full one minute text. I thought that perhaps I could do a couple of transformations of her (lovely) voice, not really sure how I (or Astra) would combine those with the 15 second sounds.

On Tuesday, Sept. 11, the morning of the NYC attack, I was in my daughter's school, as I am two mornings a week, helping the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders with their math assignments. I got back home at about 10 a.m. Jody, my wife was supposed to take Joan to the Amtrak station in White River Junction at around 10. I was surprised to see them both at home. Jody said: "Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center, and one into the Pentagon." Shocked, and confused, but not having television, and not having an immediate idea of the scope of the situation, for some reason Joan and Jody got in the car and drove to the Amtrak station (I remember stupidly thinking something like "well, Amtrak's at 34<sup>th</sup> street..."). They came home a few minutes later.

Joan, an Australian citizen, was stranded at our house, and couldn't leave until Friday (again on Amtrak, this time connecting in Springfield, MA, to Cleveland,

where her son was going to pick her up by car from Cincinnati). I called her a refugee, she referred to herself more correctly as a "displaced person." She was remarkably cheerful about being stranded in a foreign country at war.

Like everyone else, our entire family (Joan now included) was more or less incapacitated by the events. Work, daily life, music, seemed, for the time being, trivial. Somehow, the only thing I was able to bring myself to do was make short little sonic transformations of Joan's voice. It seemed like a and therapeutic activity, and Joan and I sort of did them together (she'd tell me which ones were interesting, which directions to pursue further, and so on). For the next few days, we hung out around the house, watched the news (we connected our television), and listened to Joan's voice on the computer.

On Friday, September 14, Joan left for Cincinnati. I took her to the Amtrak station. On Saturday, Joan called me from the rock n' roll hall of fame in Cleveland (I had recommended she go there). I was happy to hear from her, not just because she had safely arrived, but because Cleveland was perhaps not a bad place to get another perspective on our country at such an extraordinary time. Over the phone I suggested that she pick up a copy of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* to learn more about Cleveland and the U.S.

At White River Junction, I'd given her a copy of a CD with 30+ tracks of her voice: another version of the piece, that she might do in Melbourne for the Astra concert. My work on the piece had coincided with her displacement.

LP  
9/18/01