

Skylark

Dr Hannah Drayson

The first thing that strikes me as I tune into Skylark is the density of the moorland sounds, they draw over an atmosphere that is damp, crackly and woollen, one that exactly fits today's flat grey sky outside my window. At times the soundscape within is densely textured, the activities of humans, animals, musical phrases, poems to trees, at times it softens out, and I'm unsure if the birdsong is indoors, or out.

Far from being simply an avant-garde experiment, Skylark is the result of a long engagement with questions about the nature and form of community broadcast. Guy's time as chair of the Community Media Association focussed on attention to the unasked questions about community radio that were being neglected in favour of a model of community radio as an unskilled shadow of commercial radio form. As a sound artist, Guy's bemusement with the habitual responses of contributors to Soundart Radio, an FM station which she launched in 2006 broadcasting from the Dartington estate in South Devon to the town of Totnes. Guy observed that even without any direction to do so, the imaginaries of the radio studio were unquestioningly adopted so many of its users. While there is never a demand that they do so, it is rarely that contributors to the station are able to break with the protocol of a radio talk show, conversations interspersed by selected records. This is not to blame the participants for adopting the dominant protocols for the medium's use, or to overlook the success of Soundart as a potent mixer for the creative energies of the local community, particularly at time when the local art college was packed up and sent down the line to Falmouth.

But Skylark is certainly something very different indeed. Its broadcast acts as an invitation, the talkshow radio studio with its mic and sound-desk set up, with glass booth and recording light has been disposed of. It has melted into the landscape in favour of material gathered through a network of community projects, workshops, audio-recorders in boxes, archival material, snippets of instrumental performance, artists submissions, and roaming radio producers. The station computer live mixes a continuous selection of these fragments and phrases, conjuring up the events of the moor, its memories, mythologies and ecologies. The result is not quite the moor 'talking' to itself, but more reinforcing its own presence, sonic moments running through temporal wormholes, to produce a revisioning and reinforcement of the moor's own atmosphere. Where else do radio transmitters function to send an atmosphere back into itself? While Skylark's bravery seems to match the myopic disinterest in the world outside its own reality of a pirate radio station, the materials collected by Guy and her collaborators have a gentle thoughtfulness about them. It has a certain hauntological quality, outdoorsy, pre-industrial and romantic, that belies the power of the broadcast taking place over the landscape.

In addition to its disappearing of the studio, Skylark as an artistic intervention involves the feat of negotiating and setting up an FM radio transmission, an act that includes negotiation with

licencing, technical infrastructure and manufacturing. In a digital ecology where internet radio stations and broadcasts can be set up from home and are part of everyday life, the arduous nature of setting up an FM transmitter should not go unremarked. Neither should it be passed over as anachronistic or unnecessary work. The station's fixed nature (all the material broadcast by Skylark is recorded on Dartmoor, and the broadcast is only made from the two transmitters on Dartmoor) gives it a power through its scarcity, it is made of and part of a place, oddly a little like the letter boxes hidden across the moor, to get to hear it fixes one in a particular place. Rather important in this is that the existing infrastructure for hearing FM is still so ubiquitous, car stereos more particularly maintain this technology, – in the era of on-demand media and 'attention economies' – car stereo FM is one of the few places one can stumble on a broadcast rather than choose to engage with it. Weirdly given the shifts in a time where the proliferation of digital interactions has increased the station could not have begun transmitting at a more appropriate time. One that seems to a general sensitivity to the temporal nature of our connections, synchrony, face-to-face, live and pre-recorded. Our live connections seem more spread out than ever, as we talk to people nationally and internationally, FM retains a physical sense to it.

Dr Professor Michael Punt

Radio Skylark: An adventure in technological form

There often seems to be a natural inevitability about the nature of the technologies that we use. We are born in the middle of technologies and they appear to change in response to something called progress that we are an important part of. But after a little more thought and reflection it becomes clear that things that particular technologies are used for alters according to the social, political and economic conditions that prevail at any one time and in any one place. For example, while there is a generally uniform idea of the bicycle at the moment, a simple on-line search for 'bicycle wheels' will yield a range as diverse as dog-breeds in a dog-show. It confirms that there are now very many kinds of bicycle, some of which, like the penny farthing, are not so much intended for getting around but more to show just how much a 'man' the rider is. Other kinds include the rusting machine in the shed with the mildewed handlebar basket, whose sentimental value as a family heirloom and the occasional trip to the shops saves it from the scrapper, as well as the state of the art showpiece that brings a strange version of the Tour de France to a lane near you. Offroad on winding trails never intended for anything but drunken Englishmen wandering home, their tyre tracks made by mountain bikes with badges like Tredz, Wiggle and Giant Talon. The bicycle may seem to be one thing but, like all technologies, it has many shapes that change as its purpose and meaning shifts depending on who wanted it, what they wanted it for, and what the person using it wants to say about themselves. To be sure, in all its diversity the bicycle has a fairly uniform centre, but most of our creative (and energetic) engagement with it is at the edges where the shape can, and does, change contingently.

Much the same can be said for many technologies, including radio, which started its popular life as a sort of indoor fishing game for American men until other constituencies thought it might be fun to engage with in different ways. It is a perfect technological shapeshifter, starting life as a haphazard collection of wire, wax and cardboard open to the air, developing into a deeply enclosed furnishing that was an essential feature of the bourgeoisie parlour. Somewhere along the line a more footloose community fond of short pieces of pop music (but nowhere to listen to them away from the folks) carried one in their shirt-pocket. More recently radio has become just one more chip in the compendium of things in something that for some reason we still call a phone. In all of this material diversity there is an illusion that the meaning of the content of broadcast radio remains the same. An illusion that attends primarily to the production of programmes and at the expense of thoughts about reception. Broadcast news of a spectacular event may seem to the editor to have a fixed meaning, but once in the ether it becomes many things: a sign that it's time leave the house for work, a trigger for thoughts and conversation at breakfast, a background drone to relieve the boredom of the motorway, a gap between the same four/four beat so that the DJ can take a break, or a sound to be carefully mimicked at an informal language school. Some listeners may even be keen to pay attention to the content – or at least what minor differences have occurred since it was last broadcast so that they can work out what it 'really' means. The newscast may say the same thing, but what it says has meanings as different as bike wheels. A national radio broadcast relies on the conceit that here is a uniformity whereas, in truth, there is an undeniable diversity that it can only recognize in a crude demographic profile that satisfies the regulator and advertisers who are concerned only with the effect of the technology on the bottom line in a completely unrelated industry. It could be said that we get the radio that we deserve because radio users, unlike the cyclists, have not initiated change. And when we do storm the radio station to announce the revolution it is to change the content not to challenge the form. Some of the inertia that has inhibited changes to the technological form of broadcast radio stems from an apparently natural link between the finite bandwidths available and the institutional regulation of their allocation. Without it, it is said, there would be a wild-west of informal stations (as in fact there is in some cities) with antennae secreted in lift-shafts, DJs under the duvet and emergency services compromised. The consensus around this has privileged a culture of continuous occupation of a frequency and a predilection for repetition and automation that has homogenized the form.

In the last decade however, interventions into the relatively stable technological scenario of broadcast radio have emerged from the opportunities that broadband and microwave connections have offered for podcasting and internet radio stations. These distribution niches have attracted the creativity of the avant-garde in the form of sound artists, sound designers and technological 'pirates' developing new radio formats and listening modes that are not constrained by the need of the constant radio presence required by the regulators. It is here that Radio Skylark, as a unique creative adventure in FM broadcasting, is making its intervention. It is squaring the circle of the demands of FM regulators and the freedoms that an avant-garde

will always explore. It has rethought the meaning and the technological platform that has been established around community radio and made its geographical constraints its key feature. Confined to a particular area by its licence (Dartmoor) it has used this constraint to define the parameters of its content. To meet this self-imposed imperative, it has also had to rethink the idea of automated radio and invent new ways to engage a community of listeners as both content providers and content producers. The outcome of this strategy is difficult to predict and forces its production team to respond to contingencies that are agile and unusual in the world of radio.

Radio Skylark has been preparing to undertake this apparently Sisyphean task for five years and will now 'go live'. It has been a steep hill to corral the forces and the technology to deliver a fulltime FM radio station. Now that all is technically in place there is an equally steep hill as the project is realized in the public sphere. It is an adventure that will engage a distributed community in the production of a version of cultural identity in a region most known through the idealization of its tors, picnic sites and ponies. And that seems to be a good idea (especially at the moment as some fairly basic expectations about the future are becoming slippery). Radio Skylark redefines Dartmoor as a community that can speak for itself through its undivided attention to the sounds of place and people. In this creative collaboration with its users it has the potential to give voice to the previously unheard and also shift the nature of radio as a technological form away from the familiar to something that may surprise us.

Lucinda Guy
Artist's Statement

Since I began making radio in 2005, I've often imagined a radio station that plays a single, continuous piece, instead of programmes. Over five years of planning, imagining, daydreaming, composing and chatting, I have been trying to solve the puzzle of how to achieve this in a way that absolutely is radio – socially, culturally, legally. How to get a full time FM radio licence, and fit all the legislative criteria, whilst doing everything differently. To create a station that is recognisably radio, that does not sound either avant-garde or soppy. In fact, to me, Skylark sounds strangely normal, just like a radio station. And this is because Skylark fulfils a common experience of radio listening, often one of drifting in and out, of intermittent concentration to a chain of automated fragments of sound. And whereas on many stations these fragments are densely edited, studio recordings produced 30 or more years ago, along with adverts, news bulletins and chirpy quips, Skylark's fragments are stories of Dartmoor life, conversations, poems, rivers, birds, engines, church bells, readings.

The sound began to come together once I realised that the recordings could be wide ranging. Scripted and unscripted; beautiful microphones or something rough on a cassette tape or phone at home, outdoors, in an echoey village hall; new or archive. But the musical material that links them all together would be restricted to a simple mode (mixolydian, on C, with the 6th mysteriously absent) and limited to single notes and short phrases played on acoustic instruments. And in the spirit of early cyberneticians, the algorithm that combines them is extraordinarily simple, though it appears to make sensitive, informed decisions about what to play with what. Like any artwork that relies on cut-up, Skylark enlists the human ear and brain to make sense of whatever material appears together.

Skylark exploits the footprint of its transmission range, by only broadcasting sounds recorded within that footprint, and refusing to be an online radio station. If people want to listen at home they will have to move to the area. The Skylark heard today is the beginning of what it might be. New material is added every day, and the listener/makers of Dartmoor will decide where it goes next.