

Notes on **NAMELY for Peter Manson** by Lawrence Upton

This “visual poem(s)” is also the indicative score for the text-sound composition of the same name by myself and John Levack Drever.

It arose from an invitation to provide a contribution to a festschrift for the fortieth birthday of the Scottish poet Peter Manson, for whom I have the greatest admiration. Shortly after receiving that invitation, John Drever and I received a commission from the *Centre for Contemporary Poetics Research at Birkbeck College*.

John and I met to discuss the commission quite early in the period of the commission and agreed that **Namely** would be the score that we used, although, at that time, relatively few images of **Namely** had been completed. We met again when the image-making was complete and agreed upon the actual score.

There would have been a number of ideas that we considered; but I think it is true to say that, usually, one idea quickly stands out from the rest. The criteria are many and include individual enthusiasms; but also all the things that we have done in the past seen as a set; and the requirements of the commission or performance that we are considering.

Having made that decision, I spent some months making performable images. At that stage, there was little for us to do as a collaborative partnership; and, in this case, the making of images for the two Manson-related purposes was identical: the main thing was to build up a collection of as many as possible usable images.

The image-making process is quite simple conceptually. Each image is a visual variation upon one or other of the alphabetical strings of the letters of Peter’s name: pEtErMaNsOn or PeTeRmAnSoN. In this case, all the images were made using a number of off-the-shelf graphics software packages, although that statement refers to a number of potential approaches. Sometimes – often – the initial work is thought through in pencil drawings.

It is a process which could result in mere decoration; but one is trying for expressiveness and variety, both visually and (ultimately) sonically.

In **NAMELY for Peter Manson**, there were actually two scores, one a subset of the other, making for two discrete layers of sound, the performance of the main cutting in after the start of the subsidiary, and out before the end, providing a consistent continuity to a rather various piece.

The methodology of *reading* the score is one that I inherited from the late Bob Cobbing although what I do nowadays differs considerably from what Cobbing did.

I call it *sound-singing*, a term I have taken from the Canadian Paul Dutton.

It is often called “sound poetry”; but that is a term which worries me. Similarly, I worry that the images themselves are sometimes called “visual poetry”. I am not for or against calling it poetry; but I am keen to emphasise that there is a great deal of music in it and that this work-making domain exists as an intermedium or points to an implausibility in our current categorisations.

Such reading into sound-singing is, it seems to me, clearly improvisatory, although that, too, invites discussion towards clarification and analysis.

We, John and I, are both guided by the score; no more than that, no less; although, at the later stages, the text-sound composition version of the score will have some timings attached; and there may be a number of directives, which may not have been written down, to do with relative amplitude and tone and regarding transition from one image to another.

It is our practice, with scores of this type, the great majority of the scores we have used, to present them to ourselves and to the world as digital slide shows and to archive the printed versions quite early on.

Generally, if I need a printed version, in the case of **NAMELY for Peter Manson**, I prefer an ink jet version; but, this time, I have made a laser copy -- for convenience rather than aesthetic choice. I am more than content with it.

Also, for this print, I have made a very few adjustments to the images. They are tiny. Effectively, it is the same images that have been used throughout.

Retrospectively, the artist Guy Begbie and I are working on a three-dimensional book art version of the score, using the concertina format of our multiple work **Foreshore** but the see-through and other spatial techniques of our **engine / house**. This activity is not intended as decorative; and we shall almost certainly do things which will change the original formally rather than just presenting it in a new way – as with, for instance, the transfer from paper to screen. Inevitably, that will change the work notationally, making it a score for a piece that may well not be realised,

although primarily it is to be a visual work. I am more than interested in these ambiguities and in their elaboration upon the concept of the solo maker. I do not want to deny the importance of the solo artist; but it is only one part of the “story”.

The Upton / Begbie score of **NAMING for Peter Manson** is to be exhibited in May 2011 at *e-poetry 2011* at SUNY, Buffalo, USA; and probably later at UWE, Bristol in Autumn 2011 when Guy Begbie and I have a joint exhibition there.

Returning to the original version of the poem / score, John Drever and I make studio recordings of me performing the score vocally; and John then composes using those recordings, with the score to guide him. (Most of the time, I stay away while he is doing that work; just as he gives me little or no guidance during recording beyond strictly technical requests and instructions: that’s just how it is, but, if I needed to, I would justify it as good practice, to avoid influencing each other unduly in what one might call basic interpretation, and thus to achieve the greatest true collaboration.)

I compose twice in real time, in quick succession; and, then, John composes from those compositions in studio time. That studio composition has sometimes been used as a stand alone performance of the text; but that is not the primary intention.

In performance before an audience, I utter with and against the playback over speakers of the studio composition. In performance, the studio composition may well be played back through software so that further real time treatment by John Drever is possible. There is no rehearsal. We aim to come to the work as freshly as possible; and, while there might be any number of wrong ways to perform, there is no one right way. A “wrong” decision may be corrected in the course of a performance.

The live output may be spatialised across up to 8 speakers; and that is done by John in real time. My live voice may go straight to selected speakers or go through John’s desk where it can be mixed or treated by him. There is no one decision; it depends upon performance circumstances, the needs of the composition and also what experiments we want to make. I don’t think we have a particularly overt *make it new* ethos; but such an inclination is certainly there and the most interesting work is the work we have not yet done.

The live performance is a further real-time composition but with two independent and collaborating composers, John and myself;

while, as a performer, I find myself, in part, in “conversation” with myself as well as with John.

At the same time, John will be having an analogous experience, as a work which he has composed runs in changed form, changed additively and otherwise, along a slightly different course, his task being not to maintain the integrity of the earlier version but to work towards a new version. He, too, is performing, every bit as much as I am.

It can be a complex process, and it is demanding and tiring; but the tasks being performed have their differences between performers; and they are spaced out and time-layered; so we get through, and as equal makers.

Prior discussion in friendship forms a large part of it, I believe; and we spend a lot of time mulling over what we are to do, while the actual doing is soon over.

We do not wait until the time feels right or some form of inspiration arrives; we just make the work as well and inventively as we can. Because we do not seek to compete with each other and because we put trust in each other, we seem to avoid social friction.

Lawrence Upton

Scilly, January 2011

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