

ADAM FRANK / Introducing Radio Free Stein¹

I am currently developing a large-scale critical sound project called *Radio Free Stein* that aims to render an as-yet-undetermined number of Gertrude Stein's approximately eighty plays into the form of radio melodrama. My use of the term melodrama refers primarily to an eighteenth-century composite genre that integrates the performance of spoken words with musical accompaniment. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* is often considered the first of these works in which "the spoken phrase is, as it were, announced and prepared by the musical phrase." While this form makes an appearance in classical European opera (such as Beethoven's *Fidelio*), it takes distinctive shape in modernist opera and musical theatre, for example in the technique of *sprechstimme* as differently used by Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Kurt Weill. In the United States, Robert Ashley has gone furthest in exploring this form: Ashley's textually dense work uses a complex notation to mark pitch and tempo, at the same time that it encourages the speaker's own speech styles and patterns of intonation.

I am not a composer but a writer and critic, and my goal for this project is primarily critical: I would like to further the study and understanding of Stein's plays. My intuition is that the collaborative effort required to render Stein's dramatic writing into radio melodrama will help move us toward such critical understanding. I will try to explain this intuition in a moment, but I should note, first, that the idea that Stein's plays can or should be staged (in whatever form) runs counter to the argument that Stein's plays are linguistic experiments meant primarily for the page, either closet dramas (Puchner) or metadramas (Bowers). This position tends to underestimate the historical influence of both her plays and poetics: it is difficult to ignore the strong gravitational pull that Stein's poetics of landscape drama has exerted on post-WWII non-naturalist theatre practices in the United States and elsewhere. *Radio Free Stein* invites composers and sound artists to explore the writing of this crucial figure for modernist musical theatre in order to consider different ways of integrating music and sound with words.

1 Some of the following remarks are taken from a paper I gave at a seminar on "Modernist Opera" at the Las Vegas meeting of the Modernist Studies Association, October 19, 2012.

I imagine that this description raises a few basic questions: why emphasize sound and music? why radio and not live theatre? and how will such collaborative productions help to understand Stein's plays? To begin with the last question, consider an excerpt from Stein's lecture "Plays" (1935) in which she describes one motivation for her turn to play-writing:

I had before I began writing plays written many portraits. I had been enormously interested all my life in finding out what made each one that one and so I had written a great many portraits.

I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play. (*Lectures in America* 119)

If portraiture is a genre for knowing individuals, then plays, as Stein understands them, are representations of a number of individuals in dynamic relations of mutual knowing. *Radio Free Stein* is based on the idea that Stein's plays always pose the question: how can one possibly know and depict (without narrative) the complexity of group relations? Practically, when it comes to reading any given Stein play, I have found it useful to invite a group of people to imagine what a staging of it might look, sound, and feel like. Because the texts of her plays often do not distinguish between various formal theatrical elements—dialogue, stage direction, setting, characters, titles—a reader who aims to experience and somehow understand a Stein play must decide on each one of these elements. These formal decisions are not entirely different from the intonational, rhythmic, and grammatical decisions a reader makes when he or she reads any piece of Stein's writing aloud; imagining a particular staging of a Stein play is an elaborated extension of the practice of reading her texts aloud. Consider, for example, "An Exercise in Analysis" (1917), which consists of a large number of Act and Part titles, each of which is followed by one or more sentences.

A PLAY

I have given up analysis.

Act II

Splendid profit.

Act III

I have paid my debt to humanity.

Act III

Hurry.

Act IV

Climb. In climbing do not be contented.

Part II

Run ahead.

Run on ahead. (*Last Operas and Plays* 119)

Initially confounding, the play becomes more readable (and amusing) with the decision that the Act and Part divisions are names of characters. It can then be cast for four voices. Differentiating and assigning the voices lets a reader begin to explore a play that has the feeling of a gossip session. When four readers get together to read the play (as I have done, and have had students do), it becomes precisely a skewed exercise in analysis of their own competitive and collaborative relations. More generally, then, because Stein's plays are attempts to stage group relations, collaborative group efforts can restage those dynamics and help to understand them.

But why enlist composers and sound artists in this project? I have already remarked on the practice of reading Stein's texts aloud as it permits intonation to assist in making the grammatical choices that are often necessary. As Steven Meyer has put it, intonation "provides a compositional landscape for grammar, and thereby provides grammatical constructions with determinate significance" (302); indeed, a number of critics have attended to the crucial role for intonation and other dimensions of sound in reading Stein (Pound, J. Frank, and others). It is well known that Stein's writing has appealed to twentieth-century composers: for example, John Cage composed some of his earliest works as musical settings for Stein's writing, while Morton Feldman mentions Stein many times in his essays and remarks. I believe it is possible to offer a genealogy of the notion of "soundscape," coined and conceptualized by composer R. Murray Schaffer, back to Stein's landscape poetics (via Cage's *Imaginary Landscape* compositions). Stein's writing appears to play an important if somewhat underexamined role in post-war North American music and composition. My project seeks to explore this role, not

primarily by way of the archives of twentieth-century music and writing about music, but by way of contemporary compositional techniques. What might twenty-first century composers and sound artists, trained and educated in the tradition of modernist music, already know about Stein's writing, that is, what do their compositional techniques already know? And what happens when this technical knowledge (or know-how) encounters Stein's writing itself as source material? The composers who have agreed to participate in this project are keen to explore Stein's writing for their own compositional purposes.

Finally, why radio? I have chosen this format for a number of reasons, some of which are practical: radio is cheaper and easier to produce than live theatre, I have more experience with audio production, etc. Of course, radio permits audience members to concentrate on the interplay of verbal, sonic, and musical elements that I am most interested in. In addition, radio itself plays a role in Stein's poetics. As part of her American lecture tour, on November 12, 1934 she participated in a radio interview broadcast live on NBC stations coast to coast. Reflecting on it, she said, "of all the things that I never did before, perhaps I like this the best" (*How Writing Is Written* 71). What Stein liked most about broadcasting was its way of addressing the pressing questions of audience: it enabled its two meanings to be condensed, the audience, or the persons attending the radio interview, and audience as the act of hearing itself. In a sense, radio freed Stein from the audience by focusing her attention on audience or the act of hearing. As a medium, radio gives us access to a range of spaces of address and to a movement across this range: the placement (distance and orientation) of the microphone in relation to the source of sound create distinct, changeable spaces for the listener. For example, the microphone can be placed so that a listener experiences voices as if only a foot or two away, more intimate than in live theatre (we can hear traces of breathing, the textures of vocalization). This strange play with phenomenological distance, what Theodor Adorno called "radio's physiognomics," suits what I understand to be the loosely coordinated spaces and open affective circuits that Stein aimed for in her theatrical landscapes, or at least, in some of them (and it remains an interesting question as to which of Stein's plays will work best on radio). Radio audience suits Stein's plays and her landscape poetics: this is the basic idea that motivates *Radio Free Stein*, a project that aims to connect her plays and poetics with readers, her strange audience.

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The first recorded instalment of *Radio Free Stein*, recently completed, is based on Stein's "For the Country Entirely. A Play in Letters." First published in *Geography and Plays* (1922), "For the Country Entirely" is one of the many conversation plays (as Jane Bowers calls them) that Stein wrote during the wartime year she lived in Mallorca with Alice Toklas. Stein and Toklas had left Paris in March 1915 because of air raids and coal shortages, expecting a brief stay in neutral Spain but remaining until the following spring. "We are very peaceful," she wrote on a postcard to Carl Van Vechten in December 1915, "I am making plays quite a number of them. Conversations are easy but backgrounds are difficult but they come and stay." *Background* is part of a constellation of key terms for Stein, terms that include *land*, *geography*, *country*, and others that she associates with her plays and theatre or landscape poetics. These terms name both a technical problem for Stein as a writer (what to do about setting) and, in the Mallorcan plays, a sociopolitical question: how to make space for women (and other non-combatants) to engage with and participate in experiences of war?

"For the Country Entirely" is clearly interested in questions about patriotism: as an American expatriate in self-directed exile in Spain, how would Stein engage with and disengage from national allegiance in the supercharged context of Europe 1915-16? But the meanings of the word *country* are not solely political: they are also geographical (city versus country) as well as sexual. What are the relations between the country as nation and the country as ground or territory? And what do "country matters" have to do with how countries matter? The title of Stein's play could be read in terms of a feminist antipatriarchal writing that undermines total (and singular) dedication to abstract nationhood by way of a more tactile commitment to (multiple) female sexuality that the subtitle glosses as "A Play in Letters." But these sexual meanings should not be read as simply replacing the national ones. The title's various meanings, as I hear them, exist in ironic tension with one another. And why would Stein choose to write an epistolary play? One way to think about this would begin from the observation that letters are a form of semi-public writing that had been offering women (especially aristocratic European women) a way to participate in political discourse for centuries. Epistolary form offered one answer to the question of how women may participate in the largely male business

of war, a matter of importance to Stein during the writing of this play. “I had never read anything aloud much,” remarks Stein in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “except all the letters of Queen Victoria to Alice Toklas when we were in Majorca at the beginning of the war.” Victoria’s letters, with their hyperstylized gestures of intimacy that are at the same time direct expressions of political will, would have served as powerful examples of the form of women’s letter writing as it coordinates social and political space. In preparing a scenario for radio I foregrounded the play’s epistolary form by casting the first scene for three voices: two North American women’s voices (roughly, Gertrude and Alice personas that I initially named A and B, then renamed Ava and Bella) dictate letters to a male English amanuensis (C, later renamed Walter). For the recording I chose a specifically English voice to index Stein’s reading of Victoria’s letters as well as to thematize the eighteenth-century epistolary novel form that subtends the play. The fourth voice, American and male, I name William Cook after Stein’s close friend, an American artist who Stein and Toklas spent time with in Mallorca (his name appears at the end of the first scene and again in Act 2). The play explores the group’s dialogue and emotional relations.

Stein’s writing makes space for the collisions of words in their many meanings and ways of making meaning. As a reader and sound producer, I would like listeners to find the words in Stein’s plays, the sparks thrown off by their collisions, intelligible or, as Stein would put it, enjoyable. In the same radio interview I mentioned above Stein answered William Lundell’s bemused question, why is her speech so much more intelligible than her writing, this way: “Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking, putting it in other words. But I mean by understanding enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it.” For the purposes of the *Radio Free Stein* project, and for reading Stein more generally, I take this definition seriously. How can Stein’s plays be read and staged so that they are enjoyable? This is the guiding question for the sound recordings.

A word on recording and performance: in spring 2012 I received a Hampton Foundation Grant from the University of British Columbia to create a sonic staging of “For the Country Entirely.” The recording features music by Dorothy Chang and is directed by Adam Henderson. Performances are by Cara McDowell (as Ava), Lucia Frangione (as Bella), Alan Marriott (as Walter), and Kurt Evans (as William Cook), with Mark Ferris and Domagoj Ivanovic on violins, Marcus Takizawa on

viola, and Peggy Lee on cello. The recording was mixed by Josh Henderson at Otic Sound. In addition, a live staging of this radio play took place at the Western Front on May 3rd, 2012 (performers as above, except for Rebecca Wenham on cello). Both a video recording of the live performance and the studio audio recording are available at the *Radio Free Stein* website, as is more information about this project and miscellaneous resources for thinking about Stein's plays and her writing in relation to sound. Please consult <http://www.radiofreestein.com>.

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