



BBCRadio4

JOHN KEFALA KERR: A COMPOSER'S ELECTION BLOG

Tues 5th April 2004

Woke up.

Became election blogger for Radio 4 Today programme.

Had muesli.

Switched on radio to listen to Today programme.

Rang Dad (83) to tell him about me being a BBC blogger. Dad said he was excited about getting his two hundred quid from the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Composed celebratory piano sonata comprising two hundred notes—one for each rebated to pensioners in budget. Like the rebate, it's a 'one-off' sonata, which means you're only entitled to hear it once. Thought it might be a good income-generating idea to have a hyperlink where you could click to submit your credit card details and listen to as much of the music (up to the £200 limit) as you want (say, the first twenty quid's worth?).

Whilst queuing for the bathroom, asked son, Josh (17), if he'd changed his mind about not voting (he hadn't). Asked daughter, Anna (14), the same. She said she didn't know anything about any of the parties. I advised her to get hold of the manifestos as soon as was practicable. She told me to get lost.

On way out of house, asked five people in street who they were planning to vote for. Told them I was doing important blog work for the Today programme. They didn't believe me. They said that I didn't look the part because I was wearing a loud shirt.

Heard on the arts grapevine that the cultural utopia that is the north east has just

seen important music teacher education programmes axed. More gutless managers making gutless decisions!

Heard reference on radio to turkey twizzlers. Had political epiphany . . . vote Jamie Oliver!

Got obsessed about voting Jamie. Asked Denise who she was going to vote for. "Jamie," came her reply. Wondered why the government was being so coy about implementing Jamie's school dinner plan.

Composed opera about why I think the government is being so coy about implementing Jamie's school dinner plan. Here's the libretto:

School's Minister Ruth Kelly: (*furioso*) Who does he think he is, muscling in on my turf! That Charles Clarke was too soft with the little foul-mouthed chef!

Ministerial Adviser: (*sotto voce*) But what if people start to vote for him?

Ruth Kelly: (*dolce cantabile*) No way! I simply can't believe the British public will not see through the naive utopian idealism of his scheme. In any case, it would set a terrifying and undemocratic precedent. Can you imagine having policy influenced by celebrities?

Adviser: (*moderato*) What, you mean like Bob Geldof and Bono?

Dreamed that I'd turned into a lump of hydrogenated fat living inside food products marketed at schoolchildren. As I was about to be eaten by a pasty-faced little brat, I suddenly got the urge to rebel against my own very nature, and with an involuntary cry, yelled: 'No, little pasty-faced child! Don't eat me. I will make you die before your parents.' Just then, the managing director of the school dinner franchise popped me into his mouth and silenced me forever. Little did he know, however, that I was making my way directly to his coronary artery.

Watched election announcement speech performances on TV with critical eye.

Wrote feedback report as follows:

BritGov School of Political Performance Arts

AUDITION REPORT: 'Election Announcement Speech'

Student: Tony Blair 'Labour' (solo)

A ponderous and pontifical tone was struck, which cleverly capitalized upon the prevailing mood of solemnity occasioned by the recent death of the Pope.

However, the rather faltering delivery (intended no doubt to lend weight and gravitas to your chosen text) resulted in a hesitancy that suggested 'trepidation'. Whilst this is not an inappropriate emotion for a Prime Minister seeking re-election, its rightful place is with 'inner' or 'private' feeling (as in the Churchill-Thatcher tradition) and not (as in the comedic style preferred by the Redwood-Major crooner tradition) out there for all to see! We are not yet ready for a revival! Thus the resulting tension (between inner and outer) rendered your characterization stiff and soulless. As you know, solos are always difficult to pull off unless one is fully in command of ones art, so in future you might consider the use of elaborate props as distractions or perhaps draft in other faces to lend a more consensual feel to your performance.

Student: Michael Howard Conservative (ensemble)

A timeless style of Tory showmanship; well delivered and engineered. The (mainly female) chorus was nicely arranged, neatly turned out and suitably attentive in demeanour. This definitely brought out the 'gentle male' quality you've been working so hard at over the past year. I would seriously question the wisdom of using blue screen technology, however. It would have been more effective, and certainly more politically correct to have gone for a 'real' chorus rather than a projected image of one to merely standing in front of. This reflected badly on you in more ways than one, for it gave your physical appearance a faded, semi-transparent look and an iridescent halo-effect at the edges that would, in any case, confuse audiences who have come to associate such images with the 'metaphysical' persona of the current incumbent. Be warned that at BritGov plagiarism, intentional or otherwise, is frowned upon.

Student: Charles Kennedy Liberal Democrat (flashmob)

Not a bad effort at this tricky, ad-hoc form. You succeeded in getting everyone together in the right place at the right time, well kitted-out in colourful costumes and with the paraphernalia expected of the serious electioneer (placards etc.). The 'jostly' choreography worked well but Health and Safety issues (did you do a risk assessment?) should have been addressed in advance because the poke in the face your leading lady received went well beyond what was required to achieve the mob effect.

The opening gambit – a screen kiss, could have been more lingering, or at least given on both cheeks. Remember, she is deserving of your best attentions, she is your greatest asset. In her role as 'miraculous seat-winning MP who breaks the mould in a staunch Labour stronghold', it is she who will set events in motion that will ultimately lead to the denouement you, as the wannabe premiere, so badly seek. In any case, a decent kiss (snog, even?) would have sent a continental-style, pro-European message that is in tune with Lib Dem policy. A missed

opportunity, I'd say.

Like the other two candidates, you completely ignored the dramatic potential of sound and music. This is not uncommon, but please consider in future the very useful contribution crowd effects, rousing music, canon fire, trendy pop tracks and other accompaniments might offer. Why not try the BBC sound effects library for starters?

Went to bed.

Wed 6th April

Woke up. Put on quiet shirt. Had porridge.

Decided to conduct Voter Apathy Pre-Election Experiment

Aim: To detect signs in the Here-and-Now of imminent General Election.

Method: Avoid exposure to media for entire morning (no TV, radio, newspapers or internet),

Result: No signs encountered of pre-election activity. No flags, banners, ranting activists, trucks with Tannoy speakers etc. Nice sense of security, eg. local branch of Kwik Save has taken on additional checkout employee, no Tsunami has hit Heaton, food still available to opposition party supporters.

Conclusion: Election battleground evidently not sited in my Here-and-Now, therefore need Time and Relative Dimension in Space transportation device to go in search of pre-election activity occurring in other Here-and-Nows.

Action Plan:

1. Acquire transportation device from BBC Drama Dept.
2. Travel to other Here-and-Nows for close encounters with pre-election action.

TARDIS Diary

Date: Last Saturday

Travelled back in time to watch previous Saturday's episode of Doctor Who. No election-related stuff there, only its antithesis: a transcendent narrative; the archetypal remedy of the redemption-hungry British; a gratifying shiver for the collective spine, as the Doctor's God's-eye view offers a very British end of the world. Tearfully we watch a beleaguered, post-Iraq War mum cheerfully getting on with the washing, blissfully ignorant that we observe her from a guiltless

future, five billion years hence. I switch over only to discover I've narrowly missed a close encounter with Tony Blair in Ant 'n' Dec's Here-and-Now.

Date: Last Sunday via Some Time Last Year

Still hopeful of achieving real-life political encounter. Decide to improve my chances of being targeted by politicians by compiling a (modestly sexed-up) dossier about myself and forwarding it to Milbank, Conservative Central Office and wherever the Lib Dems, Greens and others hang out. It's designed to aid them in forming a clearer picture of my likely voting intentions so that they can target me effectively and persuade me to put my cross in their box. The dossier includes facts such as age, height, marital status, etc. but also more juicy stuff such as how I've never ever seen an MP in the flesh, and, given the wherewithal, would dearly love to believe in their existence.

Place: Safely Back Home

Had bath.

Saturday 9th April

Composed short piano piece designed to create a mood of political debate. I play it to members of my family with encouraging results.

Josh, my abstemious son is the first to react to the music's perfectly nuanced political swell. He says he is still adamant about not voting ever, not even when eligible. Jonathan (19), my nephew, IS emboldened by the assertive, opinionated tone of the music. HE Insists that the BNP is the only way to go. I reassure myself that he speaks with the deranged, testosterone-injected metabolism of a Suzuki SV600 rider. Sam (his girlfriend) is moved to chastise him for the extremity of his position. She's studying politics at Liverpool University, a fact which holds little sway with Jonathan, who is resolute. My niece, Natasha (21), says she doesn't like Tony Blair. She blames him for the death of David Kelly. Sheila (49), my sister-in-law, says: "We have a duty to vote, even if you trash your voting card in protest you should still vote." To her, not voting is unethical and undemocratic. I disagree. Abstentions are a statement.

I wonder whether it might be possible to disseminate my political mood-music more widely; perhaps taking to the road in a battlebus, inserting a cassette with my most potent compositions on it, winding the windows down and turning up the sub-woofer for all to hear. I anticipate, however, the likelihood of trouble when travelling through Nottinghamshire and getting clocked doing an average of 70.1 mph by long-range speed cameras and receiving a fixed penalty fine that bankrupts my entire campaign.

I have a strategy rethink and decide to do everything entirely in the virtual domain without setting foot outside the house.

I invent e-Democracy, an Alternative Reality Game (ARG). Here's how it works: Imagine a group of puzzle-freaks and spin merchants getting together in an anonymous London office building in order to launch the latest instalment of a new ARG. The game (codenamed May 5th Election) involves following clues called "manifestos" that claim to hold the necessary information for people called "voters" to make informed choices and decisions, thereby benefiting from, and progressing through, the game. But these manifestos are smokescreens, designed to distract from the real meat of the game, which is to determine which of several named "candidates" conveys the most consistent e-image, the most authentic e-personality and the most believable e-message. When you think you've discovered it, you vote for it. It's that simple!

Problems arise in the case of younger players of the game (those aged between 18 and 24), who also happen to be the ones most adapted to the workings of e-living and the most adept at discriminating between the number 38 bus and an Xbox hero. For those people, significant frustration is felt when trying to derive adequate engagement with, and stimulation from, the game's purported 'real life' import. Consequently, these players, though eligible, either give up half way through or don't bother playing at all. The "parties" (whose job it is to deliver peaceful and struggle-free encounters with e-Democracy) are bewildered by this lack of interest.

Early indications suggest that my game is not working—making a loss and in danger of being taken off the shelves.

Monday 11th April

Did home finances calculation on back of endowment shortfall warning letter envelope.

Josh (bright lad/university material): Tuition fees = £3,000 pa.
Total: £9000 for three-year course.

Unwrapped boiled sweet to aid concentration.

Added estimated accommodation and subsistence costs (£3000 pa).
Grand Total for Josh = £18,000.

Opened bottle of Tesco Cava to create mood of buoyant prosperity.

Anna (similarly bright): Same figures as above.

Grand-Grand Total of monies required over next six years = £36,000

Took sip of wine.

Applied shrewd strategic thinking to problem.

Possible courses of action:

(1) Deny children access to higher education in flagrant contravention of Government policy.

(2) Saddle them with the problem and buy myself a Harley Davidson.

(3) Sell house now and forego nursing home in future

Tuesday 12th April

Went to Kwik Save.

Bought extra Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

Held dinner party where guests chattered about the New Democracy and how confusing it is now that it's imposed regardless. "More a force-feeding than a contagion," said one of my articulate, outraged guests.

We discussed the pros and cons of a watertight mandate and how nice it was back in the old Beyond Reproach days, the days before Tony and Dubyer's Excellent Adventure.

Later, whilst doing the washing up, I consider venting my anger and frustration in music, but despite hearing the sinewy strains of a solo cello with its shrill notes held up against the high register as if by the lapels; despite hearing the raucous tremelando going off like gunfire, and the pizzicato twang of a shell hitting a building; despite hearing its impassioned notes resonating off hard surfaces like that grieving mother banging her head against the dead son's casket, I decide against it, and await instead the sound of my voting slip falling through the letterbox.

Saturday 16th April

The Parable of the Four Artists and Creative Togetherness

Once there were four diligent and conscientious artists. Like most artists, they

were a little tiresome in their ways because they were always holding out for “something fragile and special”. This fragile and special something was something that ordinary people didn’t really believe in or maybe were scared of and pretended not to believe in, so by the standards of regular society the four artists were ‘a little weird’, not least in the way they spoke about things by using funny elongated silences between words and also in their unusual choice of dress, which was a result of their penchant for charity shops.

One day the four artists found themselves unexpectedly working together on a brand-new, exciting, innovative and adventurous idea that went by the name of Creative Togetherness. Creative Togetherness was a joyful and happy idea that was the brainchild of the Department for Access, Fairness and Togetherness. The idea behind Creative Togetherness was simple: make everyone creative, especially from when they’re a child.

The Department for Access, Fairness and Togetherness liked the four artists a lot because they possessed hard-won skills that were very useful and joyful and happy and could make Creative Togetherness a reality. But the four artists were a little puzzled by Creative Togetherness because it kept ringing them up to offer them money to do what they did anyway when they weren’t working for Creative Togetherness and were just doing their normal thing: the thing they’d been trained to do and had earned them degrees and prizes and professional esteem etc.

What the four artists didn’t realize, however, was that Creative Togetherness was very selfish and only wanted to take the credit for what the artists did and not give anything back in return except money, and even though the artists were vulnerable and naive they still felt uneasy about Creative Togetherness because when it came down to it Creative Togetherness was the new kid on the arts block and in the four artists’ eyes it hadn’t gotten off to a very good start when it held that car boot sale-style event where the artists were supposed to show up with their stuff to pitch to prospective Togetherness Partners. The ‘car boot sale’ had been a flop because some of the potential Togetherness Partners became offended and outraged when one of the four artists displayed a sculpture made out of one of his own steaming stools and another played a tape of a chainsaw and guitar duetting that he’d composed.

This was what made the artists uneasy and cautious, especially when everyone said ‘Thank God these ghastly artists are the exception in not being examples of standard joyful and happy artists, which, as we all know, is more normal in common-sense everyday life.’

While the four recently employed artists waited for their 3.30pm meeting with the Arts Coordinator in the school staff room, they chatted together and generally

bemoaned the state of things, especially how it was impossible for them to get their artworks appreciated. This was, they believed, because even though these were prosperous Creative Togetherness times, they were also mind-numbingly dull and brain-sappingly bland times. As the four artists conversed, Digital Woman (not her real name), who was picking fluff from her woolly tights, became quite agitated.

“You know?” she said. “The people at Creative Togetherness told me that although the kids in schools love what I do, they themselves don’t know what to make of it because there not being a market for it probably means it’s more or less meaningless.”

Dance Woman (also not her real name), appalled by this, concurred with Digital Woman by waving her hands vigorously. “It’s the same with me. They told me that my body movements weren’t really the kind of thing you’d see on telly and that if I wanted to get on in my art I could do no worse than think about changing my body, or the way I move it, or both!”

Sculpture Man (real name withheld), who’d been silent till now, scratched his neck, saying, ‘Look, the answer’s obvious, we should vote in the election for a party that wants to preserve the challenging and radical aspects of art, a party that understands art’s complexity and believes in the principal of keeping cultural organizations at arms length. In other words a party that would scrap Creative Togetherness.”

At this, Music Man gave a loud guffaw and when he spoke it was with a dissenting voice that the other three were surprised and disappointed to hear and as they listened to him explaining how just because in their careers they had developed skills over years and years and had amassed enormous track records and vast portfolios of work and had made personal sacrifices such as foregoing financial security and luxuries in the name of rigorous practice, it didn’t mean that they had any more right of a say in these matters than the newly employed people at Creative Togetherness who were also pretty intelligent and also had their fingers on the pulse

. “If you’re stupid enough to go around exposing your nerve-endings in the cause of social critique or truth or the pursuit of beauty or whatever, then you deserve to get them burned or any other bad thing that might happen to wilfully exposed nerve-endings,” he said, rather callously.

Digital Woman, Dance Woman and Sculpture Man were horrified at Music Man’s outburst. What they didn’t know was that Music Man had been shortlisted for one of the eleven new administrative posts being offered at the newly founded, lottery-funded Culture Dome and that he was merely practicing the pledge-based

language and pseudo-Artspeak of Creative Togetherness because it would stand him in good stead for his forthcoming interview and that was why, ever so slowly and surely, Digital Woman, Dance Woman and Sculpture Man became persuaded through the sheer force, charisma and optimism of Music Man's oratory, that maybe they had been wrong all along about Creative Togetherness, and the idea took root in them that if they did not vow from that day onwards to do everything they could to help Creative Togetherness become a reality and be grateful for any role they were offered within it, then they might become forgotten and left behind artists, artists without a project or a workshop, in other words, redundant, pointless and doomed artists.

And so it came about that once Digital Woman, Dance Woman and Sculpture Man realised the self-centred and undemocratic nature of their attitudes, it wasn't long before the irritating gaps in their speech began to fill up and their dress senses improved, and even Dance Woman, whose natural medium was not speech at all, learned to speak with unabated eloquence about the value of The Arts and its role in promoting Social Cohesion, Quality of Life, Cultural Industry and other wholesome policies.

Wed 20 April

The quality of 'liveness' is special—it has a frisson that occurs when it is made known to you by some mundane or exotic means that you inhabit and exist in the here-and-now: the real, immanent, live and lived moment. It's what gives theatre its charge and its dangerous edge: there's no going back, no deleting or rewinding. Liveness also underpins 'presence', it's what constructs the embodied, participative 'we' in social rituals. Rituals such as voting, for example. But somehow the communal sign that we do on this day, make concurrently and collectively, a gesture of great significance is proving too pre-modern in these parts. At the very least it's an organisational inconvenience, too expensive, too 'political'.

Re-working the communal Here-and-Now of the polling station as the There-and-Now of the red button or the There and Then of the postal vote, erodes tolerance of that most profound yet increasingly irksome experience for the English: the brief wait in the company of strangers.

Friday 22 April

Got up.

Had muesli with soya milk.

Went for hospital appointment.

Decided to check on NHS whilst there (seemed OK).

Walked home.

Watched party leaders on TV news. Tried to visualize how I would need to be for their words to become mine. Howard has me metamorphosing beyond recognition. My outer skin turns a Kafkaesque pink and my innards conform to a shape that creates great discomfort but which yields the right words and mannerisms.

With Blair I'm a pantomime horse, the back end to his front, running blindly in the dark as he trots around assertively. The trust issue is a misnomer with my head where it is.

Thursday 28 April

Listened to cassette in car. Found subliminal message in Britney's *In the Zone*. It says "Gonna be a Lib Dem", which is a real coup for Charles Kennedy I reckon. It's before the line "If you wanna party, just grab somebody". Give it a listen.

Decided that there's a lot of untapped potential here for social and political instruction - what the Master of the Queen's Music calls "musical agitprop". I can already hear it - all those subversive ideas and hidden lines of dissent squeezed surreptitiously between whacky guitar solos and cheeky violin cadenzas. Well I shouldn't get too excited because it turns out he's not thinking what I'm thinking. On closer inspection this dangerous-sounding activity is actually about promoting "constructive, creative thinking" and valuing "the most wonderful, thought-defining work of our very civilization" . . . such as Purcell, for example.

Hence, in his RPS lecture (www.royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk) Sir Peter Maxwell Davies blames television and pop music for stopping people from liking the kind of music he likes and thinks other people should like too. In the good old days, when he was a good old music teacher at Cirencester Grammar School, both classical and popular idioms flourished side by side. But, as with that other more recent and equally uneasy double-act, a grotesque lovechild was spawned: the 'pop-style song'. This monstrous, New Labouresque notion carries a disappointingly familiar theme—the will to control. Where the (humble) MOTQM would give us all a dose of reclaimed classicism, a free telly zapper and a sobering dose of pedigree-inspired deference, New Labour perseveres with ticky box politics. Both insist that we hear only the civilised, undrugged sound of

“musical seriousness”.

Wed 4th May

Read interesting article about drivers who listen to Beethoven or Mozart being more likely to crash their cars than listeners to other musical styles because classical music is said to induce dream or trance-like states. Learned that rock music fans fare much better because lively, up-tempo tracks enhance concentration at the wheel.

Learned too that drivers who choose jazz become anxious and hesitant because that style arouses “complex states of mind”. Remembered how the phrase ‘mood music’ had been used to describe the rhetorical tone and associated spin of election discourse. Thought it might also be apposite for describing the ambient mood elected governments create.

Wondered whose muzak I’d rather be stuck in a lift with for five years. Decided that, despite policy convergences, May 5th does indeed offer three distinct choices:

1. Neo-imperialist virtuosity, whose intricate and unfathomable jazz plays too well, but also worries and distresses.
2. Soporific recapitulations of outmoded and outdated themes.
3. Understated, purposeful beat of reason.

Thurs May 5th

Woke up. It’s Election Day! Had muesli. Went to vote. Left specs in car so nearly put X in wrong box. Dropped Denise off at work. Saw bag lady pushing overburdened shopping trolley. Did music workshop in primary school. Asked Year 5 kids if they’d voted. Got blank looks. “You know, in the General Election?” I say (more blank looks). “I’m never going to vote,” says Dean (9 yrs). “Why not, don’t you want power?” I say. “I’m going to vote,” says Danny (9yrs), enthusiastically. “No you’re not,” I reply, emphatically, “You’re too young.”

Sunderland wants to be the first at something, and it’s vote counting that is that city’s forte. But I don’t wait up to share in its glory or its disappointment. Instead I go to bed and dream of a giant swing-o-meter sweeping over my neighbourhood, causing everything to turn blue. Thankfully I awake the next morning to find everything’s the same as before, only I notice some blood coming out of one of Tony Blair’s nostrils and Gordon Brown’s got a bad case of inflation.