

## The Throat of the Loon

Steven Connor

This is a transcript of a conversation I had on May 4, 2004, with Julius Nil - the broadcasting name of writer and conceptual noisician Seth Kim-Cohen his Resonance FM programme *One Reason to Live*, in which guests were asked to reflect on the one piece of music they would choose above all others. The transcript appears, with all the ums, errs and actuallys lovingly preserved and the tangled thought impeccably uncombed, in *One Reason to Live: Conversations About Music With Julius Nil*, ed. Seth Kim Cohen (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press, 2006).

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JN: So, I'm curious about your selection – what have you chosen for us to listen to?

SC: Well, I've surprised myself a little bit. It's Tori Amos and a song called 'Blood Roses' from her 1996 album *Boys for Pele*.

JN: Can you give us some sense of why this is your selection? We'll get into this as we go, but...

SC: It's partly because for my entire life I have felt intense and overmastering nausea at the sound of the harpsichord – even the word 'harpsichord' – and nothing, not even John Cage, has helped me get over this, until I heard this track.

JN: You say it's the harpsichord and your aversion to it that led you to choose this song. So there's a bit of reverse psychology going on there.

SC: That wasn't what led me to choose the song. It was what led me to be captivated by it. I bought this album, and I didn't know anything about this woman apart from the fact that I'd listened to another track that was on the album, very drunkenly on a flight back from Scandinavia of all places. This airline – SAS I think it was – did a speciality in interesting, quite edgy female performers (the Bjork effect, I suppose), and they had a whole cycle made up of Bjork, Tori Amos, and PJ Harvey. I was later to discover that P J Harvey is a friend of Tori Amos, so they must have been quite prescient because I don't think they knew that. I think they just thought "here are some funny, cracked yodelling noises that these women do in a very interesting way". On the tape

was 'Caught A Lite Sneeze', which was a big hit for Tori Amos (I think it had already been a big hit for her a long time before but I didn't know this). And so I went and bought *Boys for Pele* and was rather disappointed because it seemed all to be rather fey, singer-songwriter piano-playing things. And then quite early on into the album – although I don't always listen to albums in the right order, so it might not have been early for me – there was this track. I don't know if this will disappoint you, but it's still far from being my favourite track on the album, although the album has been something I carry around with me. I hardly ever play the album because I know it so well – meaning I know every nuance, I know every clunk and thud and pant and, you know, everything in it, and I know the accidental aura of sounds much more than I know the actual songs. So, when I thought about choosing something for you from this album, I thought it could be 'Blood Roses' because I thought there's enough in it of what arrested me so much about the whole album. The harpsichord features in the whole album, and she doesn't go back to the harpsichord on any other album. When I first heard this album I knew nothing at all about Tori Amos – I knew nothing about her having been a brilliant, talented pianist, and getting a scholarship at the age of five to go to the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, and giving it all up and becoming a rock singer. I thought she must be English, or European, or South American, and this must be a homage album to the great football player, Pele. But it's not: Pele is the name of a Hawaiian volcano. I rarely listen to music without knowing far too much about it in advance but in this case I didn't.

JN: But you've found out since then.

SC: Yes. Tori Amos has a huge, passionate, utterly besotted, and quite lunatic fan base, who worship every move she makes and every thing she does. I do think she's very good about staying connected with them and all that kind of thing. But no one ever talks about what is good about her. I think this must have been true of Kate Bush who is in that stable of very, extraordinary female musicians whose success prevents them being taken as seriously perhaps as they ought to be. Bjork and P J Harvey still have their credibility, but you know once the hits stack up the disdain will cut in. There's an enormous web presence for Tori Amos and you have to kind of cut through it. When she can be allowed the space to talk not about her beliefs and her boyfriend, but about the way she likes sounds to be made, then some very extraordinary things come out.

JN: In researching the show I did – and I have to confess I don't know much about Tori Amos – I found this Fanzine that's been devoted to her since the early '90s, which is called – tellingly – *Really Deep Thoughts*.

SC: (shrieks)

JN: And on their website she's referred to as a 'healer and a philosopher'.

SC: Yes, and I don't know if she still believes in fairies, she's now I think around 40, she's married and has a little girl and lives in Cornwall – Cornwall is always a worry isn't it?

JN: It doesn't dissuade one from thinking she might believe in fairies.

SC: No, precisely. I'd like to think that she might have had different things to say if anyone had spoken to her about what she wanted to talk about, and what clearly concerns her during the hours and hours and hours she spends recording music. I believe *Boys for Pele* was the first album she had real control over. And I think in some ways it's the strangest of her albums for that reason. It's often the way. Kate Bush's album *The Dreaming* is the same. No one has done anything quite like that and been allowed to get away with it. And then maybe EMI wouldn't let her get away with it, or maybe she didn't dare again. So no-one's ever bothered to ask Tori Amos 'you know, what do you spend those hours on?' That would be very interesting, because she's someone who listens to her voice and does things, as it were, in the interplay between singing and what happens with the microphone, this strange, secondary apparatus that intervenes between singing and hearing. But you know, more than that, there's a whole range of tonalities and noises in the mid-place between music and understanding that's she's very fascinated with and I think knowingly manipulates.

JN: So you said earlier that this is not your favorite song on the album, but am I catching this, that in some way you think it's the most emblematic?

SC: Well, I think it's good for me. Don't you think that? Sometimes there's a song on an album, or sometimes a whole album, you think you know it's the best thing for you to listen to, like certain kinds of foodstuffs. And it is, really, it is the best thing to listen to, and in some ways I think it is the best thing on the album but no-one ever refers to it. But – well, this is kind of about life and music, isn't it? And I'll tell a story which is very bizarre, about the walkman, you know everyone talks about the walkman and the tube and the airplane and

you know, city spaces, well, I was gardening with the walkman on. So there I was, amongst the slugs and the smells of lavender and all those things in my north London garden, scrabbling away, and I'd just got this album (I had it on tape) and I thought 'I've got to stick at this'. And instead of just rushing through this track I listened to it, and this kind of elemental, phlegmy, noisy, whirring, seemed so, well, it seemed so utterly unlike what I was doing, the kind of earth-father stuff on my knees with a trowel. Now, of course, it's indissociable, I can smell this song, you know, it has for me a loamy sort of smell, even though I think in itself it's nothing at all like that. This is like any kind of sound and organisation of sounds that take hold of you, you don't quite know where they live, what they mean. You know, what you're meant to think of them. Of course there are lots of technical things in the song we could talk about, lots of worked-out things – yes, you're nodding, you're looking very excited now I've said this! Do you think we should talk about time signatures or something like that?

JN: No, no. I am curious how those “clever things”, as you put it, contribute to the not-so-clever emotions...

SC: Well, one of the things is, I don't listen to a lot of jazz and when I do listen to jazz I don't listen to it very intelligently. That's to say, I don't understand key changes and time changes in the way that people who listen to a lot of complex music do, because I'm so completely taken up in the banal tonalities and structures and tempos of contemporary music. OK. So one of the things that made it kind of difficult for me to listen to this, well difficult in a tantalising way, is that you can't count it, or it takes quite a while to learn to count it. In fact the time is quite simple. It starts – appropriately for a harpsichord, because I think there are some jokes played with the instrument – with a slow 4/4 rhythm, made up of very rapid triplets, you know: diddely-diddely-diddely-diddely-diddely-diddely – and it sounds kind of rattley and buzzy and harpsichordy, and you think it could be any old bit of Telemann or something like that. And then you have to suddenly lurch into what is a slower three-time: “blood **ros**-es, blood **ros**-es”, and so on. And the song keeps alternating between those very fast rippling triplets, and the slower, more stately sections. They're the same time, as it turns out, because you know if you did the triple-time quickly enough it would just turn into the other one. But the lurches between them are very arresting, I think. I feel like a squirming aesthete going on about this, but that's not what it's like for me, it's just a kind of pull. You know, there I am, pulling out the roots, digging back the lavender and, all of a sudden, my sensibilities are being played with by this little pause, this stop. So, I

think that is part of it, the completely unreadable mood of the song. I hope I don't want to know what it's about.

JN: Well, I was going to ask you.

SC: Well, shall I have a go? No, you tell me.

JN: Well, no, I don't have a guess, partly because I'm confused by the song. I'm confused both by the pairing of the musical elements which I think you've just described quite well – I think you're ready for jazz now – and the lyrical concerns, and some of the internal lyrical concerns don't connect for me. I have trouble sorting out the 'you' from the 'me' in the song.

SC: Yes. You're right, you're right. What's going on? Who is this?

JN: I read one review, which tried to attribute the chicken character, if it is in fact a character...

SC: I think it's a trope, not a character.

JN: Alright, well, this may turn it into a character – this is from the *Village Voice*, so quite reputable, not just a fan site – who said 'the chicken who played a prostitute in the song "Blood Roses" '. So they're somehow attributing the chicken, or connecting the chicken to a prostitute, and I didn't quite get that. I don't know if you've given the lyrics thought in that way?

SC: Not too much. The interesting thing about the lyrics is there is this switch of persons. 'I've shaved every place where you've been, boy' – it's such a kind of yucky thought, and you know, it is a great raw lyric and she's very good at this, especially in this song. 'When chickens get a taste of your meat, boy' – well maybe that's, you know, 'your' as in 'my', but then we hear 'when chickens get a taste of your meat, girl' and 'boy', and it is very peculiar what is going on. I think it is very savagely and uncontrollably incoherent really. What I worry about is that this is really a kind of banal kvetch about bad people doing nasty hurtful things to her. Now I have to be solemn here for a moment. Tori Amos was raped, as a young performer just starting out, and she confronted this, wrote a wonderful *a cappella* song on her first album about this experience. I can't remember the title of it now, but I can sing every word. And she subsequently set up a foundation, I can't remember now, it's R.A.I.N.N. Now I think this may be a song that is about the apprehension of violation. The song is sufficiently angry and also indeterminate that it could be any actual or sensed violation. And I remain adolescent enough to get excited by songs by people

who are very angry at other people for having done very, very bad or wounding things to them. So I recognize the sort of, unleashing of rage that is somewhere in this song, sort of like in *Hard Times*, where a character, Mrs. Gradgrind, who is dying, is asked if she's in pain, and she says 'there's a pain somewhere in the room but I can't exactly say if it's mine'. There is something of that in this. I don't know quite what the pain is, I don't know quite what the anger is, but I'm quite sure there's a gateway through which every raw, bruised, angry, adolescent of every age, from 16 to 65, can step. I think it's a very scraped, bruised, poured-out, fractured, incoherent lyric that is drawing very deeply on an experience of being violated, or being in a relationship that starts to feel violating. I think there's a lot of songs on this album – so I've read on the websites – that deal with a break-up of a relationship Tori Amos had. But that kind of stuff just makes me feel creepy and you know, giggly, and I don't really want to talk about it...

JN: That's interesting. This portal you're describing through which one walks, passes, it does seem as though her fan base have set her up as the provider of this portal.

SC: Exactly.

JN: And then there's the question of how much she wants to provide that portal. And then there's the additional question whether in fact the fan base and the attention being paid to her is actually *her* portal. Who's transforming whom? You know, who's providing this service, this healing service that she's given a lot of credit for?

SC: Well, there's nothing healing about this song, thank goodness.

JN: Well, the catharsis, you know.

SC: Could be, but that's not my problem. I want to be healed by doctors, when I can, when they can, I don't want to be healed by songs. I want the opposite from songs – malady - and this does that for me. For me. But it's only me that I can talk about with any authority. Well, I think you are right, actually, in that there may well be a not-very-helpful circuit going on whereby the song responds to what has already been set in motion, by the singer I mean. I mean she had already established a reputation, a distinctive fan base and a relation to it – a very intimate relation to the fan base, of which, as I say, I feel part a privileged guest but part an interloper. As you can tell, I want to talk seriously about this person and her music, and she keeps going on about fairies, and also

about a particular kind of redemptive, authenticating anger that I stopped taking seriously a long time ago – I still feel it, it's still wonderful to feel, but I have stopped taking it seriously. So, I don't listen to this song, thinking 'yes, that's what you did to me, you bastard, and now at last someone has articulated it', because... Well, tell me what you think about this: with a lot of songs I love, the words get less and less meaningful, and the better they are the more this happens. I was thinking about 'Being For The Benefit of Mr Kite' off *Sergeant Pepper's* the other day, and there was an enormous disappointment when I found out that was just a pastiche of a playbill, a good one, a really, really good one, but all the madness was taken away from it. But now, 30 years after I found that out, now it's got much, much better, you know, because I'd forgotten about that kind of stupid occasion, all those things about Henry the Horse, whatever, have come to be magical symbolism for me in an utterly stupid and absolutely private way, but a way that everybody will understand. I mean, a lot of this comes from mishearing words, doesn't it? I don't know if anybody on this show has talked about mishearing words, but the words you take into yourself and even the music you take into yourself, involves you appropriating it and turning it into a kind of surrealist poetry that isn't really there. And some of the words in this song – 'When chickens get a taste of your meat, boy', are exactly like a perfectly sensible lyric misheard, in the way that we routinely mishear lyrics about 'why don't you call me?', 'why judge a car meet', that kind of thing. So there is something about this just on the edge of focus, that I continue to like about this song, though I have slightly surprised myself having chosen it and slightly surprised myself having been able to talk about it, already, for so long without having talked about the things I thought I would.

JN: Well, we'll get to those – there's time. We will shift gears, I promise you, soon, but I did want to go one step further with this current topic which is about the healing and the kind of cathartic elements. And rather than focusing on Tori Amos and her fan base and how or why they might find these affects in the music, what I'm curious about is your take on why it seems that music, amongst the arts, is the forum in which people find this service is provided.

SC: Well, it has a long and respectable history, doesn't it? Music has been thought to be healing, although perhaps not in cathartic ways – think of the Tarantella wave of hysterical dancing that spread across Europe in the wake of the Black Death in the 13th and 14th centuries and onwards. People in the grip of this, clearly imaginary illness – it wasn't caused by the bite of the tarantula Italian spider, despite the name – were totally disordered, broken apart by music. They'd dance, but the only thing that could heal them, bring them to their senses was music. And there are two theories, certainly in the history of

the West – or really as we should call it, the North – about music. One is that music is very, very dangerous and suspicious stuff, especially music that hasn't got words to rein it in and hold it in check. And the other theory is that that music, because it has the same structure as the universe, with the Pythagorean theory about perfect proportions and so forth, is a sort of a cure-all. And I suppose that's why there's this kind of purgative theory. It does interest me that music is a form of exposure, and I think especially for us, now. Music in the twentieth century has itself undergone wound and trauma, almost programmatically. This has been the century in which music has become a fierce quest for self-undoing – you know, how far can you go with painful sounds and still have them turn out to be readable as music? And that resembles the structure of wounding and cure, in a way. So I guess that might be part of it, and the feeling I have about not completely liking this song might go along with that. All the things that I like best are bits of music or sounds that I've started out either dutifully sitting through and thinking 'nothing, I feel nothing for this'. I think listening to difficult music is like learning grammar in school – it's horrible, there are no immediate rewards, but the long-term rewards are great. The sort of exposure to painful experience, without a necessary guarantee that it's going to turn out to make any sense, is something we've learnt to do with music I think, much more than with modern art. People pretend that they get very upset and shocked and outraged by modern art. But the eye is not like the ear. Stuff that comes through the ear takes you over, you are vulnerable to it in a way that you are not with the eye. So no one is really shocked by modern art, but a lot of music was so outraging and affecting and unencompassable that modern music slipped out of popular culture. I think that the demanding music of musical modernism, just never made it in to the cultural mainstream. Because a whole lot of other people, other than serialists and classical musicians, have been interested in putting music to the stake late in the twentieth century and into this century, it's only now that that experience of exposure and just generally being roughed up by this thing and learning to accommodate yourself to that roughing up has come about. I don't want to overstate this. Believe me I have lots of things on my shelves that are very, very, very painful to listen to. I have those friends who say 'listen to this, it's wonderful' and you know what's going to happen to you when you put the headphones on - it's going to be like having a chainsaw applied to your eardrums. I like that. There is a time and a place for that. Tori Amos, who has a wonderful melodic gift in a lot of what she sings, and she loves to cover songs like the Beatles' 'She's Leaving Home' and all of that kind of thing, is seriously investigating this kind of thing - the way she likes to molest her sweetness in her arrangements and so forth seems to me to be part of that. Yes, you've made me work it out, it's wounding the music in order to bind it up, or in order

to come up with some kind of bandage that isn't quite – I should say a 'band aid' shouldn't I? – that isn't quite music as you thought it was and it makes a difference to the way you listen to other kinds of music, for example Telemann.

JN: I can see this analysis flooding the Tori Amos website tomorrow morning. I think they might like that. Well this is pushing us in some of the directions that I think you might have been thinking you'd be talking about today, which is some of the more sonic elements that is happening in this piece. You mention the harpsichord in particular that you have had a troubled relationship with, and she uses it in what is obviously an unconventional way, she starts off conventionally, and then she starts to push the instrument away.

SC: I'm not a keyboard player so I don't know much about her technique, but she strikes me as someone who is very good in a way that Alvin Lee of Ten Years After is very good as a guitar player. That is to say very fast you know, good digit work, but just no real control. This is alright when you are playing the harpsichord as there is the clatter and the buzz and the hum of the whole instrument. But you can't really have any sensitivity. So she just gives you all these notes and you can't distinguish them. It's just a kind of broom, a kind of a great pound of pork sausages with the left hand, though she is very fast with that left hand, she likes to do fast left hand stuff, and it's very low. Normally when you think of harpsichord, you think of this pixie-tinkling, but harpsichordists are always trying to make you forget that the natural sound of the instrument is a bizarre cross between a xylophone and a helicopter, all that grrrrashing and crash, along with all that dinkly-dinkly-dinkly nursery stuff. When the song starts off you get the breaks in the harpsichord, because that's the other thing about it – it's like the bagpipes, you can't do smooth transitions. It stops and gasps, and you kind of lurch and you have to start again.

JN: Yeah, that sounds a little bit like some of the contemporary electronic glitch work where you are working with very small discrete units of sound and they have the same trouble there, they don't, a lot of these artists tend not to have droney noises or anything that's sustained so when it ends, that's it, you have the blankness that follows.

SC: Yes well it is leaky, but leaky in a way that... I mean I evoke the bagpipe but in a way it is completely unlike the bagpipe, as there is lots and lots of mechanical noise in the bagpipe that I love. But it's different from the bagpipe as that's all about not being able to stop things. The thing about the harpsichord is that nothing lasts. So if you play very fast you get this sustain that lasts only a little time, enough certainly to interfere with the next note,

especially in low frequencies, when really all you hear is a kind of rumble. I must say, though, listening to it now on CD, as opposed to cassette, the distinctions are much cleaner. Maybe I should have just bought a better version and listeners would have been spared all this. You can certainly hear more of the notes and maybe my problem is just that I couldn't separate the notes on a tape, and then you get the lovely rumbling, which I persist in thinking is part of what she wants.

JN: Well, yes, she is playing a harpsichord through a Marshall amplifier too, so she is obviously trying to get that distortion, that fuzz, and bring out that low end that you don't typically hear.

SC: Well, Tori Amos has said that she wanted to play the piano like a guitar and I've always thought there actually was a guitar here, but I don't think there is.

JN: There is a moment in one of the reviews where the person said that the harpsichord is to the piano what the banjo is to the guitar.

SC: That's good.

JN: So they've taken this guitar idea but they think what they are hearing is a banjo.

SC: Yes, that gets it.

JN: So it's that low end rumble.

SC: Yes it's that kind of growl throat noise, You know, Tibetan monk noise. I guess that just comes out of playing it through these amps, and you obviously read the credits better than I did (but then they are very, very small). Yes, it's like she has tied the knot up and Bach and the late 17th, early 18th century has kind of joined up with the fuzziest, hairiest guitar you could imagine. I can't remember why I was talking about that, but you know, I do like it and we stopped it probably just in time to hear how it goes to tinkerbelle stuff afterwards. Which are accompanied curiously with some unintelligible lines about the belle of New Orleans trying to show me once how to tango and it's going dee dee dee and I suppose you think 'oh yes, just like a tango', though it's not like a tango at all. This is partly to do with the oddity of three-time in popular music. And you know, she does quite like this, she does a lot of sort of vaudeville, musical-type songs that will sometimes go into waltz-time and evoke that kind of seedy popular dance culture very well and very knowingly. After all, here is someone who has played the piano in bars a lot. I saw an interview

on a website. She was talking about her latest compilation. She has put out a compilation recently, and was talking about how long it took her to order the tracks. I mean, come on, I like to hear about Paul Simon and 'The Boxer' taking 300 hours of studio time, and it was the first time ever that anyone thought about a popular song like that. But songs you have already done? I don't think she's remastering them or anything like that, she's just putting them in an order. There has to be a finite number of permutations. But she was talking about sonic architecture, that had to do with key changes and frequency changes, and made this clear, that this is someone who, I think, gets excited by the same things I get excited by: these sudden little lurches when you think 'what is happening?' I think she has enormously and very affecting control over her voice, especially in her work from 1996 onwards, at the top end it's breathy and quite reedy. But, you know, she's very comfortable quite up, so that gives her the capacity for rather kind of sardonic, infantile, babyish sections, naïve sections of the music so that you can then be returned to these throaty, visceral kind of sound-shit bits, excremental, roaring sound. Female artists, in particular, I think, have a kind of – it's not penis envy, it's larynx envy or something – as a female artist you have a soprano, which is almost forbidden nowadays in our androgynous era. All popular singers sing within two and a half octaves, tops. And Tori Amos likes to lurch and jump about between those octaves. It's nothing to do with androgyny, it's to do with excitement. It's to do with suddenly finding what no less a person than Aristotle identified as the inhuman in the human voice. And we love hearing it, we love inhuman sounds and technology gives us the possibility of hearing otherworldly sounds that have no possible rationale. You think 'what can that come from?' What in nature can prepare you for the sound of the harpsichord? Is there a more inhuman sound than that? Although of course we never realised that before we heard this song.

JN: Why do you think it is, you mention 4 female singers or 3 outside Tori Amos, P J Harvey, Bjork and Kate Bush, who all use their voices in a similar way.

SC: It's true, yes.

JN: But I had a lot of trouble in trying to think of one male singer who does this, maybe Scott Walker is as close as I can get. But I don't know of any, in terms of popular music.

SC: And even Tom Waits, who is in a sense at the bottom end, is giving you the same gravely ground-glass style, but he hasn't got a top register.

JN: No, it's kind of monochromatic.

SC: It is very, very contained.

JN: Tori Amos, in the space of this one song, pulls out 3 or 4 distinctly different voices.

SC: That's right. And I think that, yes, it's that kind of sense, perhaps a technical sense that you are referring to there. It isn't just the register – where on the frequency scale she is singing – it is actually the quality of that voice that suggests a different person; kind of ventriloquism, a kind of multiplication of persons. Person comes from the word 'persona', meaning *through sound*. The notion that somehow, someone different has just come on the scene. I think that men have done this with falsetto but in a very fractured way. I mean think of the Bee Gees. It's the most extraordinary sound. And less extraordinary before them, the Beach Boys, but they don't sing anywhere else than falsetto do they? So they are a bit like Tom Waits, but speeded up.

JN: And there doesn't seem to be too much of playing with persona with either of those groups.

SC: Not at all, because their harmonies are so close that they all have their assigned place, in the stave, right. They all just patrol up and down their half an octave.

JN: It's much more of a musical approach rather than a literary approach, which is key with some of these women.

SC: Yes and I think it's interesting. You see I have a weakness for big balladeers. You were very lucky not to get Celine Dion today because she doesn't write her own stuff. Well, she probably does - but she doesn't play.

JN: I don't know if I or the Resonance management would be the first to ban that.

SC: I knew it. But there is something about the female voice and its capacity to be broken. The male voice has a capacity to transcend itself in falsetto or in the tenor that goes right to the limit and unimaginably beyond. Whereas the female voice has that ethereal, angelic, soprano ceiling, but also has the belly, the stomach, that's disturbingly exciting. It's certainly the thing that excites me about that group of singers. And it is quite interesting that they are all singers (P J Harvey not quite) who use a soprano range, which is very hard to get away

with. If you come with a soprano range – like Charlotte Church, who is trying to make a career as a popular singer, you won't make it in that range, we don't want to hear that. That's Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, a different moment when men were men and women were women. But these are singers who enjoy putting themselves, putting the sound image of themselves, in a certain kind of jeopardy, and the jeopardy of the voice and of the sound is, for Tori Amos, and perhaps in a way for some of these other singers, part of what they sing about, what semantically is going on in the songs. I don't know quite why this is but it's why I like female singers. Diamanda Galas is the other singer one might refer to – that capacity to be broken, to kind of be in smithereens and yet reconstitute yourself (I suddenly realise her name is almost literally a kind of broken glass), which maybe of all the things humans do, maybe this is one thing we are able to do with the voice – is something that a certain kind of woman singer has discovered.

JN: So you are finding a formal match to the semantic meaning of the song, in a sense.

SC: Yeah, it doesn't sound like that really.

JN: Well it is because I didn't hear any of that an hour ago and now you are putting it together for me in a way that I couldn't put it together myself.

SC: Well, yes, but mostly by association, I think. I'm mentioning names that have more credibility, but, well it is true, there are singers and musicians who make the move to seriousness and I'm pretty sure Tori Amos will be making the move once she stops being popular. And you mentioned Scott Walker, a very good example of someone who not only became serious but it turned out he always was serious, it was just that people liked him too much. I don't want people to be solemn about Tori Amos because ours is a world in which everyone talks so much about everything all the time, there are no secrets anymore, and so if I had an interesting sexual perversion – and you will never know if I do or not – I wouldn't ever want a support group because what's the point of having a perversion unless it is furtive or festive secret? So I suppose in a way Tori Amos is my perversion, although everyone knows about it and I do go on and on about it, and mention her name in much more, apparently, select company. I think music, well all the arts, popular music or what gets circulated in popular music, can do that. There can be these kind of perverse uptakes of people. And then they become cults and the whole process has got to start again. Maybe it used to happen with literature but I think the structures were such that it was a slower kind of process. Whereas nowadays music jets

round the world at the speed of light and communities, sometimes secret, perverse micro-communities of less than one person, also form around it.

JN: You've mentioned an interesting phenomenon which is the artist on the downside of the career and what you do at that moment which you don't see so much in other media. You know I can think of some examples, Zola resuscitating himself through the Dreyfus affair and things like this, but you see a lot more of it in music than you do in any other medium.

SC: That's true. And I think that the long afterlife during which there is time for several resuscitations is very much a feature of music.

JN: How much of your approach tonight has been informed by what you are calling cultural phenomenology? In two minutes or less.

SC: All of it. Well... Cultural phenomenology is simply a grand and multi-syllabic way of being fed up with the kind of suspicion of all of those things that we – by which I mean academics, people like me - get up to when we think about culture. We are suspicious about everything, we think that culture has it in for us and we've got to get the jump on culture, we've got to deconstruct and work things out in order that we can get out from under cultural forms. And I don't want to get out from under cultural forms. I want to get in the midst of things and that's what I laughingly call cultural phenomenology, laughably I should say, who am I, Democritus? That's why I don't see any difference between, talking about Shakespeare in these terms or Beethoven or Bach or Dickens or Tori Amos. Because the same kinds of energy seem to me working in the same way on me, god help me.

JN: And in fact there is really no way to talk about Tori Amos or the song we have listened to tonight without thinking about previous cultural forms, harpsichord and its traditional uses and traditional sounds, and you can't detach the high from the low, the old from the new.

SC: No. And we haven't even mentioned the harmonium. We clearly need another programme for this because there is a harmonium in there too which kind of moans like the wind...

JN: Allen Ginsberg's favourite instrument.

SC: Yes. And Tom Waits is a great player of the harmonium, which is the least harmonious instrument in the world.

JN: Despite its name.

SC: And it's perfect, its wheezing, windy, keening is absolutely perfect for this rattling dentition that you have in the harpsichord. It comes in as a sort of low keening lament. So much cleverer than the words of the song, although the words at this point are really heart-stopping – 'you've cut out the flute from the throat of the loon'.