

Prix Europa: The European Broadcasting Festival 2018 - radio documentary and feature trends, forms and topics.

By Natalia Kowalska

This year 28 radio documentaries from twenty European countries were presented in the competition for the prize of *Best European Radio Documentary of the Year*. But the genres “radio documentary” or “feature” were presented in three different categories: Radio Documentaries, Radio Current Affairs and Digital Audio. Some were classic broadcasts with excellent topics, while a couple of authors played with forms, genres and narrations. Despite the diversity of documentaries on offer, the author’s perspective and strong position was a common characteristic.

The winner was *The Upside Down*, produced by Radio Televisione Italiana, RAI Radio 3, and co-produced by Tratti Documentari. The jury decided it was a “timeless story about the dignity and spirituality of work. Patiently, it leads us deep into the recesses of the natural world and the human soul. We heard a real musical experience composed of natural sounds and peoples’ memories, all told with great tenderness. The documentary turned our preconceptions of this typical social subject upside down with its sense of humanity and poetry. It was a big story from a hole in the mountain”¹. The authors of this work – Gianluca Stazi and Giuseppe Casu – showcased the story of Silvestro and Manilon. Their stories are not the same but parallel: they had worked in a mine for many years and met in 1992 when they barricaded themselves into the San Giovanni mine for months to prevent its closure.

The power of this documentary is a balanced approach with long moments of silence, natural sounds and calm voices juxtaposed with disquieting news about the strike. Also, besides the main theme-related part of the story, authors used a very accurate metaphor of explosion which “destroys the mine but not the humanity”².

¹ Jury verdict citation, <https://www.prixeuropa.eu/winners/2018/2/28/best-european-tv-documentary-of-the-year-27xka>.

² K. Michalak, *Ludzie i dźwięki*, <https://www.facebook.com/ludzieidzwieki/>.

Two documentaries were selected for Special Commendations, in second and third places. Right after the winner is a BBC documentary *The NHS Symphony* produced by Laurence Grissell for the BBC show *Between the Ears*. According to the Jury, “in words and music, the author captures the beating pulse of the UK's National Health Service”³ and what is important to the listeners; “what we get it is a universal portrait of an institution where life and death are treated with the same reverence”⁴. The first sentence of the documentary is like a declaration: “It’s like the beginning and the end must be the same. The same dignity,” a nurse says. The voices of nurses, patients and doctors emerge from different sound shots: from the distance, as a background or very close to the microphone. The author used a two-channel method to achieve a narrative and artistic aim. Obviously, stereo sound is a very common tool but not every producer uses channels separately in specific parts of the documentary. What also makes this piece unique is choir music mixed with hospital sounds: together they create a radio cantata. This is a word-based radio symphony where every sentence is both semantic and aesthetically composed.

Third place on the podium belongs to independent British producer Hana Walker-Brown and her piece *The Spirit of Hessle Road*. The story is based in Hull, Yorkshire and its infamous working-class district. After 6,000 men left Hull for the sea and never returned, in 1968 “Headscarf Revolutionary”, Lilian Bilocca, Christine Jensen and the still-living Ivonne Blenkinsop, started a movement to keep the sea area safe. From a contemporary perspective Walker-Brown tells a story from the past which is still heartbreaking and hope-giving. Although what I find the most interesting is the form: the author has collected sound pictures from the neighborhood, such as pubs, conversations and traditional folk music, montaged it with interviewees and added her own, modern, original – and a little bit disturbing - music. The impression is unusual and original, different kinds of music highlight the content and complement each other. Hana Walker-Brown often creates original soundscapes in her pieces and this is another great example of her ability to “mix and match” stories, sounds and self-composed music.

³ Jury verdict citation, <https://www.prixeuropa.eu/winners/2018/2/28/best-european-tv-documentary-of-the-year-27xka>.

⁴ Ibidem.

Besides the winners I would like to mention and shortly describe other works that I find interesting due to plot or form - radio documentaries that were both artistic and socially engaged, re topics such as euthanasia, homosexual parenting or murder.

The Other Mother by Mathilde Guermonprez from ARTE Radio France was a story about Mathilde and her partner Mag, two women in a relationship who wanted to have a baby together. After Mag had given birth to her son, Gustave, Mathilde Guermonprez started an adoption process. In her piece, Guermonprez focused on her family and her feelings, but also successfully tried to show the legal procedure of adoption by homosexual couples in France. This kind of production when authors create pieces about themselves is what I call a hero-author feature⁵. The plot of this work is obviously personal and the author wasn't hiding behind any character or nickname. But even though it was personal and intimate, the importance of the subject for many people and its social relevance cannot be denied.

Another piece that places the author in the centre – although with different methods - is *Slušný člověk* (Eng. *Decent Man*) by Tereza Křížková from Slovakia, which was also present this year at the International Feature Conference (IFC) in Prague. This piece is an example of an acted feature, another one out of eight feature subgenres I have identified⁶. The main character, Ivan, is performed by Vladimír Zboroň, who reads Ivan's prison letters. In this feature, the author is presented as one of the characters, who participates in family conversations about their neighbour and a tragic event, which was the murder by Ivan of his partner Eva. The narrative is conducted in two ways: letters are the first phonic material. They complete the picture of events in which Eva died, but above all show Ivan as a man full of remorse. Family conversations are the second one. The author's family members seem to be judges, however, this court is not obliged to give a verdict. They seek an ethical way of approaching the neighbour and the act he committed. In her program, Křížková asks important and difficult questions: does murder always deserve condemnation? Is it possible to understand or even justify this kind of crime? Neither Ivan in his letters nor the author's family can give answers. The moral judgement belongs to the listeners.

⁵ Kowalska N., *Sztuka opowiadania prawdziwych historii. Audycje radiowe typu feature*, in: *Współczesne media. Gatunki w mediach*, ed. D. Kępa-Figura, I. Hofman, UMCS Publishing, Lublin 2017.

⁶ Kowalska N., *Sztuka...*

Poland was represented by *Buchta* created by two radio makers: Katarzyna Michalak - who was also a member of the jury - and Magdalena Geizler. This documentary tells a story about trafficking of children in the fifties. The authors were focused on one particular story; they tried to understand the small society of a certain village at those times and didn't explore the subject in a national context. Their main aim was to create a documentary that could help a woman find her relatives.

The story of Helena Piskor and her family search begins with the heroine's statement, followed by the first narrative part. It is characteristic for Michalak's program to inform the listener from where she knows the hero of the story. The author's statement is long, detailed and describes the very beginnings of the story:

It was a gloomy October evening when a message from Magda appeared in my mailbox. I was very happy because with Magda, who once cooperated with our radio and then left for Scotland, I have not had contact for many months. It turned out that Magda, as a happy mother and wife, returned recently to her family town Mircze (...). One day, she found a shocking message on her Facebook profile (...): »Hello, I am looking for any information about the children of Helena Lewkowicz, who gave birth and sold in the vicinity of Mircze (...) in the fifties. It was loud in those years about children sold for money. Please, share, especially in those areas. We believe that there are still people who remember this scandal. One of the daughters born and sold by Helena Lewkowicz is my mother, born on 25.01.1953, we are looking for siblings. « I quickly contacted the author of the post (...) Both Mrs. Anna and her mother, Helena Piskor, were very happy with my interest and willingness to resolve the matter. Soon I visited Mrs. Helena (...).

This is one of the longest prologues to the story that was created based on the hero's words and is carried out with methods characteristic for radio documentaries. From the beginning, the listener knows the subject of the reportage and the story behind the plot. Probably not all information shared by the author is necessary for the listener to understand the story. However, this author's vision allows for personal digressions or focusing on slightly different topics for a while.

Buchta is a radio documentary with the author's narration but enriched with different forms of voice such as phonic quotation: a woman's story is told by an actor to keep the author anonymous. But what gives the story true advantage is its topic. Helena Piskor's story is both terrifying and catching. The authors were not able to help the protagonist discover the truth about the biological mother who sold her on the market (Pol. *buchta*),; the mystery stays unsolved.

Another thrilling piece belongs to a German producer. Abusive and neglectful treatment in obstetric settings at birth is still a taboo subject. Marie von Kuck decided to dedicate her program⁷ *Crying Isn't Going To Help You Now! – Violence in Obstetric Care* to this issue. According to the narrator: "»Birth rape« – A controversial term. Critics argue that it is only rape when it is driven by sexual motivation" but the list of abuses is long: physical abuse, profound humiliation and verbal insult, forced or involuntary medical interventions, gross violation of privacy, refusal of admission or neglect at birth. The author for her feature selected two stories to present different forms of abusive behavior at birth. With the narrator telling one part of the story and the original voice of the hero, the author achieved a reliable portrait of this kind of violent behavior.

The last radio documentary I want to mention due to its social relevance is *Matyás and his mom* by Dan Moravec from Czech Republic. Matyás is twenty-two years old and suffers from muscular dystrophy that causes him to be in a wheelchair. He lives with his mother Barbora Kosikova in the centre of Prague in a building which isn't adapted for the disabled and for that reason he couldn't leave his apartment for a couple of years. His disease is slow-wasting him and Matyás cannot stop it. But what he can and wants to do is to decide whether he wants to continue with his life. Czech law does not allow euthanasia, but some other European countries do. The young man and his mom are looking for a solution that will make Matyás peaceful. This author was not experimenting with form or genres. In this honest documentary, he tells us about doubts, rights, solutions, dreams and fears.

Two radio documentaries had similar construction based on three – seemingly unrelated – stories. The stories were not developing the same plot, but they were

⁷ The genre of the work is feature but it was presented in Current Affairs category on Prix Europa Festival 2018.

developing the same theme. The first of those documentaries is *Keep It Cool* by Geert van de Wetering and Danielle Emans from The Netherlands. It began with a story about a wife, husband and his Misophonia, also known as selective sound sensitivity syndrome, and how it affects the family. The second part was about a man called Nico who deals with an enormous amount of irritations as a traffic controller. The last one dives into a small village community disturbed by anonymous offensive letters and one policeman who decides to find the author of those. What connects them? Tolerance. All the authors decided to investigate acceptance and tensions in human relations.

A second parallel set of tales is also from The Netherlands, entitled *The Disappearing* by Maartje Duin. The radio documentary is opened by a story told by two brothers about their father, who abandoned the family leaving only a letter on the table. While this story develops, a second and third one step in: a poet from Antwerp is looking for a place to disappear in the city, and Lydia Barends decides to leave her previous life and move to the Turkish mountains. The three plots appear alternately through the documentary. As the title implies, Duin's broadcast is about leaving, disappearing and changing. It also raises the matter of things that stay after the disappearing.

The border between feature and radio drama can be very blurred - especially when it comes to a staged feature based on primary written words such as letters or diaries. *Mr. Director* by Belgium audio artist Corinne Dubien is a feature entirely established on letters to the radio station director. Letters, as an authentic material, makes me think of this work as a feature, besides the fact that it is performed by actors, which could imply radio drama.

The composition of this broadcast is an arrangement of almost thirty listeners' letters addressed to the Director of Belgium Public Radio between 1958 and 1968, enriched with archive sounds and music. The Director's response and montage techniques give a dialogical character to the piece. The story reveals the relation between the radio station and its audience from the past: the way listeners were attached to radio stations and the culture of listening.

Definitely worth a mention are two poetical features. The first is an author's narration feature, Belgium piece *Mono no aware*. Author of the concept, text and montage is Anke Van Meer who also appears in the piece as a narrator in expanded narration parts. The story – according to the author – is about leaving behind, searching and finding. It is composed with primary written word and interviewees' short stories. A voice-over story is metaphorical and intimate: "There's a lot that gets left behind. Litter. A fingerprint. A broken umbrella. A candy wrapper. (...) A house. A smell. DNA. A passport. (...) There are so many things you could've left behind. And you chose me." Searching for answers is a framed arrangement: with the same couple from the beach at the beginning and at the end of the story. It doesn't give any solution for the heartbreaking situations but documents a journey of the author and her interviewees.

A radio documentary by Shenja von Mannstein entitled *White Contains All Other Colours. The Poet Ryszard Krynicki* was a poetic and subtle audio portrait of this Polish poet. Sounds in this piece and its form were light, like his poetry. This radio documentary was composed deliberately with a story told by Krynicki and his recitation of poems. It is a poetical realization for three voices: the author's, the hero's and a speaker's.

Besides the radio documentary category, I would like to mention an audio podcast work presented in the digital audio category. *Meat* by Italian producer Jonathan Zenti is an international program focused on the human body. Every episode is a story of a particular body part. The first episode is titled *Host's Fat*. This is – like *The Other Mother* – a hero-author kind of work. In this episode of *Meat*, the author's vision and his position as a hero is very pronounced: his body is a reason for a discussion on being overweight and its social perception.

In the first part of his story Zenti says: "I decided to start the podcast with my own story: as an overweight man, I explain how my appearance and diet influenced my sense of identity". *Host's Fat* is based on an extradiegetic narration and intradiegetic statements by the author's friends. Both types of narration built a dialogical impression. Zenti as a main character is very expressive. The centre of gravity is invariably located in the author, his experience and thoughts. The message is extremely personal and universal at the same time.

The power of the author, the power of words – this is what comes to mind after those five days of listening sessions. Some of the producers decided to create socially involved documentaries, other were focused on their personal story. Either way their voice was strong, which is crucial for artistic radio genres and the audio feature in particular. Authors were not afraid to pick up on difficult topics, play with facts and voices or use different narrations and montage tools. As one of the greatest feature definitions says: “the feature is an expression of one mind”⁸ – the author’s mind.

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⁸ L. Gilliam, *Introduction*, in: *BBC Features* ed. L. Gilliam, Evans Bros. Publishing, London 1950, s. 9.

