

Rediscovering the Voice

Voice as a return to nature:

Is it that we are our voice or that our voice is us? Cavarero asserts that our voice is our expression of individuality, owing to the very moment of our birth. In birth, both mother and child are reduced to animals, grounded together by their remarkable obedience to bringing about new life. Man does not have to bear this same undertaking, or that humbling task of confronting the limits of one's body. The confrontation is fundamental to the formation of female identity. In childbirth, violent screams of fervor and vitality emerge from the mouths of both mother and child. It is no accident, I would argue, that the use of one's voice has feminine connotations.

Before the emergence of organized sounds, language, and writing, the human voice was likely a consecution of groans, sighs, exclamations, grunts, screams, etc. Vocalizations could and can be a way to restore the relationship with one's (likely oppressed) roots that precede patriarchy and colonialism, as in the case of Tanya Tagaq (and no doubt others). Excavating her historically negated Inuit heritage, Tagaq performs throat singing and other wildly earthy vocal sounds unfettered as a form of personal and cultural discovery. She gives voice to the Inuit historicity.

And as Susan McClary argues in her "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition," the avant-garde musical trends (which, by the way, hardly feel so distant) were responsible for suppressing more human interpretations in favor of more technical, or "scholarly" ones:

Anyone who has seen Bethany Beardslee perform this piece live—who has watched her as her own shredded, electronically transformed voice is thrown back at her from loud speakers can attest to the great theatrical and emotional power of *Philomel*. Yet Babbitt's writings discourage one from attempting to unpack his composition along these lines. Indeed, he warns us not to get hung up trying to map the events of pieces onto the "mundane banalities" of real life, for it is in this objective, unsentimental attitude that prestige resides. (McClary)

The denial of the body on the stage (despite the fact that these very bodies are largely responsible for the success of a work), is inherently a denial of femininity. McClary argues that women were essentially discluded due to the often misogynist content of these modernist works. I would also contend that because women are endlessly reminded of the role of their bodies through both natural and societal constraints, the denial of the body on the stage was a denial of the woman. The most obvious way to

push back against this dehumanizing music was to display the most “freakish” and outlandish of sounds of the voice.

Fundamentally personal and carnal, the voice is a human substance that occupies a temporal space. And while voice carries with it a notion of death (that individual sound will die!), the voice has the potential to be permanent for those who it has encountered. “The voice beyond the grave,” is a haunting call to memory, an often frightening flashback to the power of the individual behind, beneath, within that unforgettable voice. Vocalists like Cathy Berberian, Meredith Monk, Tanya Tagaq, and others have always known (if even unconsciously) that the activation of their vibrating bodies would allow their voices to be heard long after death. They claimed their undeniable space within the unforgiving history of men.

Voice as compositional Tool:

Aside from the more political implications, voice was also a tool that led itself back to the realms of actual sound. Nobody was going to use their voice to concoct their serial configurations, being that such an endeavor would not only be ridiculously difficult, but “unobjective.” Composers like Julio Estrada, however, use their voice as a sounding point even when writing for other instruments. What did his body want to hear? Aha!—then to transcribe it for the instruments (no doubt a transgression), so that he could get closer to his bodily musical desires, the desires of his individual ear. The voice is arguably more successful in this sort of compositional procedure than any other instrument, given its unparalleled flexibility and capacity to mimic other sounds.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SixFII1KTuU&feature=share>

Plurality:

Within this notion of vocal mimicry is also musical plurality. The voice can not only mimic the sounds of instruments, animals, machinery, but also take on many different styles of singing or vocalizations. An especially flexible vocalist may be able to sing in an operatic style as well as a gospel one. In cases like Cathy Berberian’s, where singing in multiple styles was essential to her vocal ability and identity, hierarchical distinctions between one style and another have the potential to be abolished in her performances. Used perhaps as symbols arranged in a collage-like form, multiple vocal styles displayed within a single performative work offer listeners (from varying backgrounds)

to hear these styles with new ears, so to speak. They are arranged to reflect off of one another, each style dependent upon another to bolster its abeyant efficacy.

Ok, but now what?:

While the return of feminine space in performance and composition has been highly necessary within the context of avant-garde music, I am left with lingering questions and concerns:

Concern #1: INSTRUMENTS

Are expressions of the body limited to that of the voice? Can instrumentalists not also make direct contact with their physical sensations? Do festivals, like *Resonant Bodies* for example, that privilege the vocalist over assert the power of the human voice? Do voices have to be placed in opposition with their instrumentalist counterparts? Are instrumentalists not already subjected to impossible tasks of impersonating the human voice in their training (e.g. “Make the piano sing!”)?

Having been a member of Mocrepe, a group that most often abandons their instruments in favor of bodily performance, I often found myself preoccupied with the question of whether our instruments were denied their own opportunity to break with the traditions of the avant-garde. Were our instruments seen only as tools that contaminate the humanistic performative experience? Is it not possible for the instrumentalist to move about on stage with the same physical mystique as the vocalist? Have composers like Steven Takasugi succeeded in giving instruments their due liberation?

Concern#2: DILETTANTISM

With the resurrection of the body in a musical performances, theatrical implications are inescapable. The boundaries between dance, theater, and music crumble and notions of expertise are thrown down the gauntlet, so to speak. While most professional vocalists are trained with some theatrical awareness in mind, the theatricalities in this kind of work are fundamentally different and unconventional. Dramatized slow movements of the opera are not necessarily favored over more odd and disjunct kinds of gestures found in Tanya Tagaq’s performances, for example. These are not merely vocalists, but performing bodies that amateurishly draw upon theatrics and dance. And if we’re to reach back into our natality and access our carnal grunts, do our traditional notions of expertise withhold any worth anyhow? Cathy Berberian refused to think of her vocalizations as “freakish” expressions, being that they were reserved only for

improperly trained vocalists. In her mind, she earned her right and ability to do experimental sounds. Being at the tipping point between modernist and postmodernist thought, she asserted her body while also playing into the hands of the avant-gardists. Who could blame her?

Concern#3: Female vs. Male

Obviously these notions of female vs. male leave little room for anything in between. They are only relevant within the origins of male domination, or those contexts to which they belong. The feminine demarcations emerge from patriarchy, which unfortunately we are far from having transcended.