Authorship and Female Voices in Electrovocal Music

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Abstract

The relation between authorship and voice in electrovocal music is explored in the context of gender. After exploring the notion of the author, compositions are discussed which embody different relations between author and voice. In electrovocal music, the medium of electronic music, and especially the work of female composers and vocalists in electrovocal music, raises questions about the possibility of authorship.

1. What is an author?

As Barthes (1968), Foucault (1969), Silverman (1988) and Ciron (1993) show, the notion of the author is complex. The author is a person, a myth, a way to classify works and a function of a text. The author is an interesting analytical category and especially relevant in relation to gender issues. In electroacoustic and computer music, the possibilities of authorship differ from written texts as well as from performed music.

The power and the problem of the author reside in the permanence of his or her creative work. Because of its permanence, a written text can be studied by different persons in different times and places. The author will 'exist' forever through the persistency of the written texts. But, as Barthes and Derrida tell us, the author is always absent from the text. The text has a 'life' of its own, over which the author has no power. In this respect, the author is 'dead': for the reader, there is only a text, and there is no guarantee that the intentions of the author will come through.

With the advent of audio and visual recording technology, performance can become a permanent, reproducible, authoritative text. Before, performances (e.g., singing) existed only in the moment itself: the sound art of the famous castrati is forever lost, but not the scores of their contemporary composers. Sound recording technology made it possible for the creations of singers to outlive the performance as well as the performers and to be copied and multiplied. Now, vocal creations by, for example, Enrico Caruso or Maria Callas are authoritative 'sound texts'. Listeners can interpret and use these 'sound texts' in their own way; and the sound can be copied, sampled, cited, manipulated, and become a part of other compositions. In this respect, the singer, like the author, is 'dead'.

Sound technology not only made it possible to record a performance of a score or an improvisation, but also to compose directly with sound on tape. This can have important consequences for the authorial status of composer and singer. Theoretically, a singer now can become an author of a permanent creative object with a recording of a performance or an improvisation, or with a tape-composition of her vocal sound. But in practice, sound technology did not eliminate the dichotomy of composer and performer. For example, this division lies at the heart of the law for copyright and neighbouring rights in relation to recorded sound products like CD's.

I will now have a look at the status of women's voices in different electrovocal compositions. I will consider different forms, functions and places these voices have or are assigned, not only in tape compositions but also in the accompanying texts and practices. It will be shown that voices or vocalists can have different roles with regard to authorship in electronic music. In electrovocal music, female voices can function as anonymous vocal material, performer, improvisor, co-author or author. In some electrovocal compositions, the authorial status of the female voice is an explicit theme.

2. ThEMA: Osmaggio a Joyce

The first well-known tape-composition with a female voice is ThEMA: Osmaggio a Joyce (1950) by Luciano Berio. Although often not recognizable as such, it is completely made of electronically manipulated voice sounds uttered by one woman. Demos is entirely based on a reading of the beginning of chapter 11, the 'siren chapter', of James Joyce's Ulysses. Especially in the first and last minute of the piece, we clearly hear this woman's voice. It has a particular, attractive, warm and full timbre. The voice is fragmented, cut into pieces, and recombined into strange combinations. Often, the voice seems to be overwhelmed by noises.

Footnotes:


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The sleeve notes, like many other texts about *Thea*, are based on a text Berio himself wrote about this composition (Berio 1959). It is remarkable in this essay that Berio relates the text to the music, but we have almost nothing about the voice. His text suggests that the spoken text is a neutral extension of the written text. We read nothing about the special, particular sound of this voice. We don’t even read who the ‘owner’, the ‘author’, of this voice is. In Berio’s text, only two male authors appear: Joyce and Berio. The text of the male composer-author is silent about an anonymous female vocal artist, who functions as ‘vocal matter’.

Whose voice is this? The owner of this voice is rarely mentioned in texts about *Thea*, although the entire composition is made of its sound. This is not ‘just a voice’. It is the voice of Cathy Berberian, the great vocal artist who with her extraordinary vocal abilities and creativity co-produced many vocal compositions of Berio and other composers.

Stoianova (1985) interviewed Berio as well as others who were involved with his work. Again, Berio doesn’t mention Berberian in relation to *Thea*. But Stoianova lets others speak who do mention Berberian’s creative role in the making of *Thea*: Umberto Eco and Cathy Berberian herself.

Reading or performing a text is not a neutral translation of the written text but a creative act (Föränge 1983). There is one written text and many ways to read it. Added are timbres, intensities, rhythms, pauses etc., what is often called the ‘material’ part of language. A written text can suggest some of these musical elements, but there is always much room left for its creative ‘oral performance.’ Especially onomatopoeia, which occur so often in Joyce’s text, invites the reader to interpret, to play with the voice sounds and voice organs and to exceed the rules of language (Atrridge 1988).

The work of the vocalist and the composer is intricately interwoven in *Thea*. But only the composer Berio is the author of this piece. His name belongs to the composition. Vocalist Berberian is often not even mentioned.

3. *Visage*

The next electroacoustic composition of Berio, *Visage* (1961), is also a next step in the relationship of author and voice. *Visage* consists mainly, and most prominently, of the voice of Cathy Berberian, uttering all kinds of sounds, and only one word ‘parole’. For this composition, Berio asked Berberian to improvise according to a few vague instructions (Berberian in Stoianova 1985: 70). The recording of this improvisation forms the main part of *Visage*. Berio made a montage of it and added electronic sounds and manipulations in the background (Oonoon-Smith 1991: 1). Berberian’s sighing, crying, laughing, moaning, groaning and stammering, and her many other impressive non-verbal voice sounds, are the most striking features of *Visage*. One can imagine that these sounds shocked the Radio of Milan: *Visage* was considered as ‘obscene’ and ‘too pornographic’ (Berberian in Stoianova 1985; Oonoon-Smith 1991), and though *Visage* was made at the Studio of Phonology of the Radio of Milan, it was not broadcast in full (Stoianova 1985).

With *Visage*, an important promise of electronic sound technology is fulfilled: that is, features that previously were considered as part of performance, i.e., vocal production and improvisation, now form a permanent, reproducible, distributable product - a composition. But still, Berberian is not considered as a co-composer or co-author. She is mentioned in the sleeve notes, but her place is far less prominent than Berio’s. Indeed, although most of the piece on this CD mainly consists of Berberian’s voice, her name is not on the cover; only the names of composers Berio and Maderna. And in Drehn’s (1982) analysis of *Visage* (just as in his analysis of *Thea*), Drehn does not even mention that the voice in this piece is a female voice. Strangeely, he does mention that in the end ‘a kind of electronic men’s choir comes out’ of the sound mass (92). (Otherwise, he only writes about ‘a voice’.) Stoianova suggests that Berberian’s art is unconscious by writing that ‘her voice’ ‘invented the expressive utterances’ (67). According to Stoianova, ‘the author’ (i.e., Berio) is ‘the owner of the body, matter, sensuality and compositional technique’ and ‘composes a coherent version’ by his ‘compositional cutting’ (71).

According to the texts accompanying *Visage*, the male composer-author organised (i.e. predominantly the work of the mind) and ‘owns’ the piece and is presented as most important. The female

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2 Berio/Maderna: Electronic works, Accompaniments, 7, BV Haast Records CD 519. The sleeve notes are written by Konrad Bohrman.

3 In Drehn’s (1982) extensive analysis of *Thea*, it is not even mentioned that this voice is a female voice (he only mentions ‘die Ober- lichtung des Textes aus dem ‘Attenborough‘ in the Kontrastoklave ‘Dritte‘). The text was handwriten in *Thea*, *Circle* and *Visage*: ‘due ouvreux qui sont des lasers à la voix de Cathy Berberian, lesquels qui so les sont une sorte de second Studio de phonologie’. (125) Note that Berberian here is not presented as a creative agent.

4 Oonoon-Smith (1991) also mentions Berberian’s share.
vocalist, who produced the most striking part of the composition by her vocal art, vocal sound production and improvisation (i.e. work of body and mind), is assigned a less prominent place. Though this avant- garde composition was made with the newest technology, the old hierarchical dualism still found.

4. La Barbara: The Name, The Sounds, The Music


‘La Barbara’ was commissioned and composed for performance by the accomplished and acclaimed singer and composer, Joan La Barbara, says the first sentence of the ‘speech’ notes in La Barbara. We hear fragments of an interview by Larry Austin with singer-composer Joan La Barbara, thirty three moments extracted from our recorded conversation, moments chosen because they seemed an essence of a facet of her career as a singer-composer. One hears Joan La Barbara talking about her authorship: she talks about her name, about the sounds of her name; about the vocal sounds she makes; she describes why she uses certain sounds and how she composes with her voice sounds. One also hears the vocal art of Joan La Barbara, consisting of non-verbal extended voice sounds. On the tape, La Barbara’s voice sounds are treated so that they keep their own character: the electronic processing stresses the richness of these sounds and does not destroy or overwhelm La Barbara’s voice. In a live performance of the composition, one will also hear and see Joan La Barbara ‘live’: doing vocal improvisation on the stage, accompanying the playback of the tape.

In the interview on the tape, Joan La Barbara talks about her name, La Barbara. She acquired this name when she married. The marriage lasted only ten months, but she kept the name after changing it a little bit, because she liked the sound of this name: it had a better ‘flow’ than her own name. Then, she demonstrates what she means by vocally ‘performing’ her name, by making the ‘flow’ she hears in this name explicit by the intonation and timing of her voice. One also hears her improvising on the sounds of her name.

The author-composer of La Barbara: The Name, The Sound, The Music is Larry Austin. Austin owns the copyright. But in this composition, the vocalist is presented as another author, not only of other compositions, but also of her vocal art: her vocal sound production and her vocal improvisation. This is being done by a juxtaposition of her different discourses:

1) telling about her work and her authorship in a recorded interview;
2) recorded vocal improvisation with non-verbal vocal sound;
3) Joan La Barbara as improving ‘live’ performer, visible for the public.

In the interview, La Barbara explains her non-verbal vocal art. Through this embodiement, her non-verbal vocal sounds are presented as a creative, authoritative, and conscious musical discourse of her, the vocalist-composer. This is quite different from opera and Hollywood film, where the non-verbal ‘cry’ of the female character is, in the narrative, an involuntary and powerless cry of fear or death (Dane 1994, Petzet 1992 (1986), Silverman 1988, Boorna 1995). Also, through the accomplishment of the interview and the processed improvisations on the tape, and the text in the sleeve notes, it is stressed that the vocalism on stage is not performing someone else’s composition, but that she, with her own improvisation and creation of vocal sound, is co-composing the composition.

Thinking about Bradley’s (1993) distinction between ‘sampling the body’ (female voice) or ‘sampling the mind’ (male compositional fragments): Joan La Barbara’s non-verbal vocal voice sounds, recorded as well as ‘live’, are not only female ‘body’, but also ‘mind’.

The story which Joan La Barbara tells about her name is very significant. It stresses the connection between her authorship and her vocal sound. Her name is presented as being not the name of the person, but of the author. It is even part of her vocal art. This name has a typical feminine history: it was acquired through marriage. But this name changed its status soon, being not the name of her husband anymore, but being chosen and changed on musical grounds.

In this composition La Barbara is presented as an embodied, plural author, referring to other works outside the composition. But she has not the status of being the author of this composition itself, though she coproduced it for a large part. Her name is in the title, being very close to the composer’s name, but at the other side - her name, being created by herself and part of her work. Joan La Barbara is object of this composition, and subject in the composition. She is also subject ‘outside’ or ‘before’ this composition, because she commented it. Very explicit, and very ‘real’, a female voice is speaking in a composition of a male composer.

5. Hildegard Westerkamp: India Sound Journal

In the work of Hildegard Westerkamp, her own speaking voice is also present. India Sound Journal (Montreal, September 1995) consists of recordings of

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environmental sounds in India, combined with the projection of images made during the same journey, and with Westerkamp's voice. Is the performance, first, one heard Westerkamp's speaking voice without seeing anybody. She said, 'I am in India,' and mentioned a date in the past. Then, one heard the same voice, saying, 'I am in Montreal,' and she mentioned the date that day. Hildegard Westerkamp seemed to have two voices, one in the past, one in the present. Confusions. Were these voices live or recorded? Then, Westerkamp herself came on the stage, and told with a musical timing about her experiences in India: the confusing, overwhelming sensory perceptions, the large contrasts; being immersed in a culture which is so different. At the same time, there were sounds and pictures of this experience.

Here, the author is in the middle of the piece, referring to the author outside the piece, to the experiences of the author in another world. But, while at the same time 'managing' her piece and her performance, the author is telling about being overwhelmed and confused in another culture, in another place.

By telling about her own experiences it is stressed that this female vocalist performer is not just a vocalist, but is the composer-author. And, the vocal and bodily presence of the author in this piece suggests that the composer-author is female. Both are exceptional, since female vocalists are mostly performers, and not composers, and composers are mostly male.

Westerkamp's presence in the piece stresses her subjectivity in different ways:
1) as speaking subject, using language and not being a vocal object;
2) as author;
3) as bodily subject: her bodily presence is not shown on display, as female bodies often are, but Westerkamp is bodily present as an active subject.
4) as a situated, non-universal subject, formed by a specific culture, being confused and overwhelmed in another culture. The sound recordings and the pictures are presented as subjective, as being made by a specific subject, as an extension of her subjective listening experience and other sensory experiences. Normally, sound recording is conceived as a neutral, objective recording of reality. Westerkamp stresses the subjectivity of listening, and, as an extension of this, of recording: recording as an extended, subjective ear.

6. Conclusion

The complex notion of authorship is an interesting analytical category in relation to gender and electronic vocal music. Although electronic sound recording and processing technology offers possibilities to change the authorial status of vocalists by 1) changing the status of their work from evanescent performance to reproducible, durable, distributable object and 2) using specific vocal sound as basis and inextricable part of a composition, female voices in electronic music are often incorporated as vocal objects. Whereas in performed music the singer is impressively present, in tape music sometimes the name of the vocalist who produced the recorded and processed sounds is not even mentioned. But there are also compositions in which different forms of vocal-compositional and textual authorship are explored and the stereotypical, hierarchal dichotomy of male composer and female voice is abandoned.

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