Hear Me Now: the implication and significance of the female composer’s voice as sound source in her electroacoustic music

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Abstract

In her writings about the role of the female voice in electroacoustic music, noted Dutch researcher Hannah Bosma has identified a variety of issues surrounding the compositional choices of those utilizing spoken and sung text in their work and illustrated the differences of use in relationship to the chosen vocalist’s gender. Bosma exclusively focuses upon the musical works of men in her studies. This paper explores how women utilize the voice in electroacoustic music and more specifically whether their treatment of the female voice in any way differs from the treatment of the female voice by their male counterparts. The paper uses the works of Pamela Z., Alice Shields, Christine Baczewska and Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner as examples of contrasting creative approaches.

1 Hear Me Now

The composition of electroacoustic music first and foremost requires the accumulation of an “orchestra” of sonic material for use in the final construction of the work. Much electroacoustic composition is of an abstract nature and audio sources may be chosen primarily for their sonic richness, complexity, and interest. However, audio materials may also be chosen for symbolic and thematic intent: the message of the piece and its creator demands that a certain sound source be used. In her writings about the role of the female voice in electroacoustic music, noted Dutch researcher Hannah Bosma has identified a variety of issues surrounding the compositional choices of those utilizing spoken and sung text in their work and illustrated the differences of use in relationship to the chosen vocalist’s gender. Bosma finds precedents for the primary roles of the male and female voice in noted works by Berio, Stockhausen, Dodge and others in both the cinematic and operatic genres. Interestingly, Bosma almost exclusively focuses upon the musical works of men in her studies so her fascinating work inspired me to explore an area which she has only briefly discussed: how women utilize the voice in electroacoustic music and more specifically whether their treatment of the female voice in any way differs from the treatment of the female voice by their male counterparts.

This subject also interests me as I am myself a composer of primarily text-based electroacoustic music and video works. In several instances I am the recorded female voice on the tape. After reading Bosma’s research which is readily available on her website, I began to think about how I had used my own voice in my music and also why I had done so. The reasons range from the practical to the symbolic and will be discussed later in this paper. A question from an article reviewer about the music of Alice Shields (which I have researched extensively) got me thinking about other women who use their own voice in the creation of their music. The result is Hear Me Now, a discussion of a very small number of the many women who use their voice as the sound source and/or the vocal soloist for their electroacoustic works and how such creative use can contribute to an expanded conception of how the female voice could be utilized in the future in a variety of artistic genres.

Bosma references the work of feminist cinematic theorist Kaja Silverman, literary critic Catherine Clément, and musicologist Joke Dame when giving a thorough background in the traditional roles for which male and female voices have been used in film, opera, and vocal music in general. After studying the writings of the cited authors themselves, I developed a list of possible compositional uses of the voice in electroacoustic music. First, the voice can be used as a non-verbal expression of impotence. This is the traditional role assigned to the female voice in movies (the scream of Marion Crane in Psycho) and in opera (the “death aria” of Butterfly). Often the female victim is confined to an enclosed space as is Crane in the shower. Typical musical expressions of this role include non-linguistic text, melismatic singing, syllabic utterances and very high soprano vocalizations. In electroacoustic music this role is reinforced in works for voice and tape in which the soloist employs traditional operatic singing techniques with the tape acting as an accompaniment. Bosma notes that in this scenario the female singer is in a sense confined in a “box” created by the tape part which never stops and whose timing must be adhered to absolutely or the entire performance will fail. She also mentions that very few works have been created for male voice and tape (a notable exception to this is Olly Wilson’s hauntingly beautiful Sometimes for tenor and tape in which the male
singer assumes the role of a tortured and powerless slave who is swallowed by electronic sound in a dramatic interpretation of the African-American spiritual). Another possible manifestation of this scenario is found in works for tape in which the sound source is the female voice – the women was in fact trapped and confined to the tape (an example of this using male voices is Tae Hong Park's 1999 work, Omoni - an interesting side observation of the Park and Wilson works is that in both the men on tape are victims). A related role – that of the voice as non-linguistic sound source (with no associated impotence) is discussed further later.

A contrasting vocal role – usually assigned to men in the cinema – is that of the “voice-over”: an all-seeing and all-powerful commentator. Musical expressions of this role include spoken text and recitative singing. Interestingly, some of the most successful explorations of this role in electroacoustic music have been created by Laurie Anderson who has described herself as a “cultural ethnographer” and whose works generally are observations and commentaries on different aspects of American life. This is also a role I assume in many of my works. A closely related role is that of the narrator or storyteller who conveys information without judgment or insight but as merely a reporter of events.

A final potential vocal role is that of the vocal manipulator – in which the voice controls its environment and serves as the creative catalyst. In electroacoustic music this can be accomplished technologically in several ways. The MAX MSP application allows the performer to control various aspects of her digital accompaniment including timbre, tempo, and melodic and rhythmic materials through the nuances of her vocalizations. Additionally using the female voice as sound source for an electroacoustic piece can be interpreted similarly. Much manipulation of a woman’s voice on tape would symbolically “free her” as she would not be confined to singing conventions. However this can also be dangerous – giving the impression of being a victim again at the mercy of the composer’s razor blade.

The four women discussed here – Christine Baczewska, Alice Shields, myself and Pamela Z – illustrate only a small representation of the women using themselves as musical sound sources in their electroacoustic works, but each has taken one or more of the traditional vocal roles outlined above and utilized it in a way that provides an empowering element to her composition and an autobiographical insight into her creative process. This study provides an illustration of the overlap of the musico logical with the theoretical where the origin of the sound source is directly related to the composer’s history and environment. Additionally the examination of the use of various musical and technological skills and practices to mold sound into an effective tool for controlling and co-opting the traditional western conception of gender can serve as an example to filmmakers, opera composers, and other creative artists in ways to utilize similar techniques for fresh and inventive results in other artistic genres.

2 Alice Shields

The composer and singer Alice Shields strongly emphasizes the distinction between the use of the high soprano voice and the lower mezzo voice in terms of female characterizations in opera and directly relates this distinction to her own work. In our recent correspondence, Shields reminded me that “composers have typically written pathetic female roles to require singers with light timbre in high registers … in general, the more powerful the timbre of the female voice, the more non-pathetic the female roles”.

She cites as examples of lyric and coloratura “victim” roles, mad Lucia of Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor and the previously mentioned Mimi from Butterfly. More ambiguous roles she adds, include Tosca (seductive-but-choosing-to-kill-herself-rather-than-be-captured) and Aida (powerful-but-eventually-dying-along-with-her-man), and are written for the spinto soprano, dramatico-spinto soprano or dramatic soprano range. Shields has made extensive study of gender roles and vocal ranges and has presented this research often in public including a speech on voice and emotion for the 2002 Santa Fe Opera premiere of Kaija Saariaho’s L’amour de Loin. (Love from Afar) Shields identifies herself and her self-written roles with the strong female characters typically reserved for the mezzo soprano voice (her own vocal range). These include Ortrud of Lohengrin, Medea in Cavalli’s Il Gustone, and Ulrica of Un Ballo en M Ascera and the composer has performed these roles. She adds that the dark and strong qualities of her voice are often used in her compositions. Interestingly Shields also emphasizes the liberating exhilaration of possessing such a voice. She shares that she had no idea that she had a good voice until she began studying singing while a graduate student in music composition. She delighted in the fact that she could incorporate some aspects of the characters she played on stage into her personal life becoming more powerful, dramatic, seductive and even scary. Having been raised to believe that she was clumsy, unattractive, weak, soft-voiced, and shy, operatic role-playing allowed her to step outside of the formerly circumscribed world in which she had lived. The composer also had been writing poetry and short plays since childhood so the voice in her work seemed essential for its completion.

Shields gives as examples of her own writing for her stronger mezzo voice her role of Coyote from the 1987 electronic opera Shaman and the supernatural role of the Medium in the 1992 work Mass for the Dead. She also cites the roles of The Woman and The Seaweed (both sung by composer) from the 1994 electronic opera Apocalypse as similar strong female characters. A more recent work, The Mud Oratorio, an hour-long commissioned piece for modern dance premiered by Dance Alloy of Pittsburgh in
2003, also has a strong female vocal role of the Narrator which is performed by the composer. 

*Apocalypse* is particularly interesting because the piece employs Shields in so many different ways. She is first and foremost the author of the story and the creator of its music. She is also the choreographer of the piece which was staged for live performance with movement patterns from the Hindu *Bharata Natyan* dance drama. Shields has done extensive training in this South Indian classical form and now utilizes the *Bharata Natyan* metrical cycles and text in much of her work. All of the live and electroacoustic voices of the opera are the composer’s own with the exception of a few scenes with the male character Shiva and one involving the electric guitarist performing some sound effects. In addition to the narrative voices, Shields also created and recorded a variety of “bird” and “sea lion” vocal effects.

To paraphrase the composers' own program notes, *Apocalypse* tells the story of "the Woman" who travels from conception to birth then to her meeting and initiation by the Goddess who Shields has named "the Seaweed." Utilizing phrases based on the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Seaweed teaches the Woman empathy, emotional attachment, and reverence for all life preparing Her to meet the male god Shiva. The opera culminates with the ritualized union of Shiva and the Woman combining spirit and matter, mind and energy, asceticism and sensuality.

*Apocalypse* began as a playful improvisation on an original text between Shields and colleague Daria Semegen one evening at Semegen's home in Stony Brook, New York. The two women began tossing verse phrases back and forth giving the composer the idea of using a "call-and-response" technique for much of the work. During the First Greeting scene, Shields sings a solo line and is then answered by a chorus. This "chorus" is actually multi-tracked recordings of the composer herself. The same "composer as chorus" effect is used near the beginning of the *On a Dark Mountain* scene and throughout other parts of the opera. When one listens to the entire piece, Shield's remarkable versatility as both a musician and an engineer is constantly evident. Shields uses English, classical Greek, Gaelic, and Sanskrit in her text adding yet another layer of complexity to the work.

By listening to these examples it becomes obvious how chorous, pitch modulation, and other electronic effects are being employed especially in the later work to make the composer’s already powerful voice even more so. Additionally in *Apocalypse*, the voice takes on a certain gender ambiguity and acquires the all-knowing, omnipotent quality discussed earlier in connection with popular male film roles. Shield’s singing and vocal processing also allow her to continue to transcend the constraints she felt she had upon her as a child. Thus the opera singer further empowers herself by taking maximum advantage of her gift in the compositional realm.

Personally I particularly enjoy Shield’s music because of the obvious joy she takes in her gorgeous and powerful voice and how she has used both her vocal and compositional gifts to contribute to the ongoing discussion about women’s roles in opera. Shield’s works for me serve as a particularly fine commentary on Catherine Clément’s *Opera, or the undoing of Women*. After reading Clément’s book, one can listen to Shield’s electroacoustic music and say, “See, this is how it SHOULD be done!”

### 3 Christine Baczewska

New York composer and performer Christine Baczewska considers herself anything but a formally trained singer and her career as a musician has evolved out of her life experiences more than from any particular focus on such professional ambitions. Baczewska, the eldest of five children, grew up singing in 3-part harmony with two of her sisters but opted to study to be a teacher feeling that this was a responsible thing to do. In college during the sixties she began writing songs in the folk music context of that era and eventually became part of a vocal group in Chicago called Care of the Cow. Baczewska tried to then gain more formal musical training but has had little success in this. She states, “I am to this day, saddened and embarrassed that, even though I ‘speak’ it fluently, I can’t read or write what I consider to be my ‘first language’.” Regardless of this, Baczewska is a successful “regular” in the New York new music scene with two solo cds to her credit and several appearances on Elise Kermani’s critically acclaimed *DICE* recording series.

Baczewska’s works fall very much into the category of composer as narrator, commentator and voice-over and can be compared in many ways to Laurie Anderson’s earliest work. Unlike Shields, she is not an opera singer and does not draw from that tradition in her music. In fact she makes an interesting commentary on how her music subverts that tradition altogether by concentrating on the undramatic and the ordinary rather than the extraordinary. She does this by “embracing the idea that the contents of my mailbox …or my grocery list …or a meeting at the office … have as much to say about a woman’s experience as the divas’ screams. The world writ small is where people really live – in the precarious emotional territory of the day-to-day.” Baczewska considers her music all about being a narrator. She adds, “Humans are galvanized by narrative and we’re conditioned to glean it wherever we can, even if there are no words attached – thus much of the emotional power of music itself.”

Baczewska’s earliest music contains much more electronic manipulation and many more electroacoustic elements than her more recent pieces. This is partially due, she states, because of her increased confidence in her vocal abilities. She initially felt that she needed the manipulation and processing to make her voice “bigger.” She was very aware of the fact that she was alone and this lead to her idea of the *Tribe of One* title for her first full-length cd; she was one voice trying to have the weight of many. In this way the use of technology for practical reasons evolved into its use
for symbolic and artistic reasons. The composer shares that her latest work concentrates on using the single line as the conveyance of her message with extrapolations as necessary to develop a wider musical context for that line. She adds that she is more interested now in the voice as primal gesture and describes much of her current work as the equivalent of wailing and banging on something with a stick. She also emphasizes the fact that even her early work that utilized more multi-tracked recording was essentially still the naked voice in accumulation.

Baczewska’s approach provides an obvious contrast to Shield’s but in many ways both women are using their electroacoustic work to achieve the same ends. Shield’s music presents the operatic genre in new and exciting ways and uses its best elements (drama, strength, vocal beauty) to subvert many of its traditional gender- and culturally-biased assumptions. By creating a greater body of literature in which a woman’s role is one of strength and triumph, she contributes a new portion of the repertoire with a new focus and intent. Baczewska on the other hand triumphs by celebrating the ordinary and familiar and elevates women’s (and men’s for that matter) quiet ventures to a greater status. Both creative plans take the possible uncomfortable gender-biased sting out of the opera genre by refusing to adhere to its conventions regarding sexual roles and dramatic outcomes.

4 Pamela Z

With the work of San Francisco-based composer Pamela Z, the role of female vocalist as environmental manipulator and creative catalyst is extensively explored. Z, a classically trained singer, became interested in composition during her senior year in college when as she puts it, “I figured out…that the composers were the ones doing the interesting stuff.” She considers herself most strongly influenced by her classical training, minimalism, and her knowledge of early music as well as punk and rock.

The composer emphasizes that she never set out to use her voice in her compositions for any particularly symbolic or artistic reason; she simply found that singing was the most natural performance medium for her and the form of expression at which she was the most adept. In an interview for Theater Magazine she describes her interest in technology as starting at an early age. Her father bought his children tape recorders and she spent much time recording herself playing all the parts in “radio shows” and layering and manipulating the sound. Later she began playing the guitar and singing folksongs in clubs during her Colorado school years. In the early 80’s the works of artists/composers like David Byrne, Brian Eno, and Philip Glass proved to her that she could combine the various aspects of her musical experience (bel canto singing, rock – influenced composition, and electronics) for her own works.

Pamela Z’s music is primarily created with live and studio-mixed layering and delaying of her vocal lines and the addition other samples and instruments as appropriate. Exemplifying my final category of performer as sonic manipulator and catalyst, she triggers the majority of her vocal effects and samples via MIDI mainly using a controller called the BodySynth, described in Electronic Musician as a device with four wireless sensors able to detect electrical impulses from her muscle movements. The BodySynth’s processor translates these impulse signals into music via MIDI messages fed to the MAX object-oriented programming environment.

The composer’s music illustrates a strong interest in language and sound for their own sake rather than as a conveyance of narrative or dramatic content. When creating the 1995 large-scale work Parts of Speech she decided to explore language from a broad range of ideas. The piece approached language from several angles including sound, grammar, and meaning. For example, the section Parts is a layered exploration of grammar rules, however another section Geekspeak is more concerned with the particular lingo of a certain group of people. Z states that she first became interested in language for its sound and was interested in the great variety of sounds she could create from her own voice by utilizing technology. She also stresses – like Baczewska – that technology allows her to become an ensemble rather than simply a solo singer. Gaifin premiered in 1999 is similarly pre-occupied with foreign language in the case of this work, Japanese.

The more recent Voci completed in the spring of 2003 is a multimedia work which features an exhaustive exploration of the voice. Subjects found in Voci range from the anatomy of the voice and of vocal production to the phenomenon of schizophrenics hearing voices. The resulting composition is not only about the voice itself but also about what interests Pamela Z about her voice. It is this aspect of self-examination in much of her music which makes her work so interesting and also adds a level of interpretive complexity to her performances and composition.

In the MIT Press publication Women in New Media edited by Judy Malloy, the composer makes the observation that using the tools that one is expected to use often brings the greatest recognition. Women, she states are expected to excel in the use of the voice, and are rewarded the most when they perform vocally. She cites as examples Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Diamanda Galas and in a later conversation with me also observed that this also seems to be the way that men wish to celebrate women the most in new music. For example, composers like Luciano Berio and Milton Babbitt owe a considerable amount of their celebrated creative output to fine vocal and tape music magnificently performed by talented and versatile women like Cathy Berberian and Bethany Beardslee. Though these women and others have been given a great deal of credit for their efforts, the principle beneficiary has been the composer who has relegated them to the rather passive role of the muse.
It can be argued that the women who garner the most respect in the area of electroacoustic music are those who take a more proactive role in developing and inventing tools and theories of composition. I presented to Pamela in counter-argument the names of Laurie Spiegel, Carla Scaletti, Pauline Oliveros, and Mara Helmuth as toolmakers who certainly in my experience are held in the most respect in the academic world of composition with technology. She agreed but argued accurately that with women like Spiegel, Scaletti, and Helmuth especially, a rarified world of [her words] “true geekdom” is entered where gender is absolutely irrelevant because what is most valued is raw brain power and technical aptitude. The female vocalist/composer, however, still receives the most positive reaction from her audience and her colleagues because she is reinforcing a concept with which everyone is quite comfortable in western culture – that of a woman using her voice and body to entertain, to persuade, and to conquer. Pamela continued this illustration for me by pointing out that the way that men traditionally persuade and conquer is by using external tools such as a sword, a gun, or armor as opposed to women who use internal tools (seductive body movement and a soft, purring voice) to achieve similar goals.

The composer notes that these ideas have become an issue in performance with the BodySynth which is an external tool used to control sound but is also strapped on and thus becomes a part of her body. This allows her to have her body unfettered in any way by an instrument offering her full freedom of movement and physical expression which is so important to a dramatic singer’s art. For example, one section of Parts of Speech deals with men and women and seductive language. The composer was able to incorporate seductive body language in that portion of her performance to better convey the meaning of that section and it certainly had the desired effect. A review of a Parts of Speech performance appearing in Electronic Musician magazine was written by someone obviously quite smitten with the seductive effect. The review author, Bean, describes her work with the Synth using language like, "a shimmy to the left could unleash a barrage of......and a shoulder roll to the right could be...." emphasizing the sensual experience.

On the surface Pamela Z’s music is very much about interesting layers of manipulated sound that delight and entertain us while showing her extensive vocal and technological abilities. However, when seen as the composer taking her voice and attacking and parsing it so utterly and completely with the digital razor blade, her work becomes more of an editorial commentary on female singers and their performance roles. This is also, incidentally, what Pauline Oliveros did with the piece Bye Bye Butterfly in which she deconstructs with technology one of the most pathetic female victims in the operatic literature (though it was done quite "accidentally" because she literally just picked up whatever record was handy in the studio that day!).

5 Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner

Another illustration of the subversion of the traditional female vocal operatic role is found in the creation of my 1995 piece Antigone’s Peace for videotape with electroacoustic soundtrack which is in many ways modeled on Alice Shields’ work. I had begun using my own voice (like Shields I am a mezzo) as a sound source in my music two years earlier with the creation of A Parable of Pre-existing Conditions for video and tape, a chronicle of my experiences as a cancer survivor almost inextricably mired in the United States health insurance system. Both Parable and Antigone are from my Full Circle trilogy, a cd-rom work about my cancer survivorship and the first examples of what I like to call “docu-art”; they are non-fictional pieces about my own life. In the case of Parable, since it had to do with my frustration about having to make career choices based on health insurance availability after having cancer, I wanted my voice to be the narration because the experience happened to me. I could have just written the text down and had an actor do it but that seemed rather silly. Why displace the experience from myself? I really felt that the piece would have more meaning if I were actually part of it; more meaning to myself and to the audience. The work was a deliberate act of exposure of myself and my inner feelings to others and would have been cheapened by using someone else.

In the case of Antigone, however, the subversion of the traditional female vocal role is more straightforward since the final video piece was actually a revision of an earlier operatic work with which I was discontent. Antigone’s Peace was originally written for mezzo soprano (and brilliantly sung by University of Iowa’s Katherine Eberle-Fink), percussion, and MIDI keyboards and samples triggered using MAX. It was intended as the starting point for an operatic setting of the Antigone tragedy and was essentially Antigone’s soliloquy as she is being lead to the cave where she will be buried alive as punishment. The lament taken directly from the Greek play itself is a catalog of the life experiences that Antigone will be denied by her early death and include motherhood, marriage, and physical love.

In further study of the piece after its composition and premiere I determined that the text provided an interesting parallel to what would have occurred in my own medical case should I not survive cancer. It was then that I decided to rework the piece and add my own voice to Dr. Eberle’s in a remix of the soundtrack. The video portion of the piece features women in the roles of mother and lover as well as epitaphs from women’s graves praising their roles in these capacities. By adding my voice to the mix I made Antigone’s story my own; the significant difference being that my story has a happy ending while the Greek heroine’s
did not. I have turned the tables on the woman’s tragedy, making it a story of triumph rather than defeat. Interestingly Sophocles turns the tables himself in this story, making Antigone’s tragedy the catalyst of loss, despair, and defeat for those against her and granting her an extraordinary amount of power in her death.

6 Conclusion

All of the women here have used their own voices in their electroacoustic music in order to tell their stories, convey their meanings, and present their ideas. A “side benefit” of such work is the re-definition of what is possible in the female vocal role in terms of drama, narrative, and effect. All employ technology to make their own voices stronger by allowing for multiple characters, multiple layers, and increased volume and intensity in their music. By creating more, stronger, alternative, and empowering voices in music (Baczewska’s Tribe of One), they add considerably to the ongoing quest for a greater opportunity of expression for women in the creative arena.

References

Much of the material gathered here was done in phone interviews and email conversation sessions with the women studied. However, the few print and online resources available for consultation are listed below:


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