Abstract

The traditional voice use in song is one of a melody. In computer music pieces and other modern
compositional styles we see a style a bit different from traditional melody, compositions that play with the
standard formula. In our new era of composition voice is used as a percussion instrument, occasional
sparse sample, or background noise that can give a piece fluidity. In last year's ICMC Paul Lansky
introduced a piece "Things She Carried" in which he devised a vocal part for the sole reason of narration.

I would like to research and compare a few computer music pieces that use voice in different
ways and analyze the future of voice as instrumentation and narration. I would also like to examine the
future of narrative music as a new spoken word/song genre of music.

1. Introduction

Voice is a versatile instrument. From accapella to larger choral groups to films and theater we
see voice as a powerful instrument to compose for and with. With computer music, we can start to see
"Richetta," and Larry Austin's "La Barbara, The Name, The Sounds, The Music" pave new roads in
modern composition for their combined use of voice as narration as well as a musical instrument. This
paper will closely examine the concept of these pieces and others with relation to techniques and styles
and will show that narration has established itself as a new musical category.

2. Telling a Story

Narration in music is not a new concept. The human sound has been used for its beauty and
complexity in the past. "Peter and the Wolf" is a tradition for elementary school music education. Urban
DJ’s speak over their mixes and scoring for film begins into a whole new category. However
experimentation with voice for computer is on the rise. A piece like Chris Bailey’s “Ow, my head" is a
good example of such. The piece is music concrete- made of samples he made with a microphone, some
of which were verbal 'noises' he made. The highlight is the climax of the piece when he exclaims, "Ow,
my head!" The spoken exclamation makes a humorous explanation for the series of unexplainable sounds
and brings us into a new mental scenario for the conclusion of the piece. One may go as far as to say the
entire acoustic component is a buildup for a one line explanation that can be seen as a narration. Luke
DuBois’ piece "Richetta" follows a similar concept, but with a more solemn and emotional tone. The
composer has taken an interview with his grandmother whose hearing is failing, and underlines her
conversation and fills in the pauses with his musical scoring. He mainly uses comb filtering to mimic the
effects of her hearing loss while she is recounting her memories of working in a candy factory, which is
the cause of her loss in hearing. This piece reminded me of the elements that go into film scoring, in that
the music underlined her words creating her story into a very enjoyable emotional piece of music.
3. Emotion

Narration brings out an emotional side to music that music without words does not. By hearing a poem or speech or such we assign a new relation to the music, a new purpose. When a composer uses such personal material as a eulogy, such as Mary Simoni's "Eulogy" we develop a new sensitivity to the piece, a human relation. It is also easier for us to understand, without program notes, the reasoning for the placement of this sound or that sound. We find ourselves not wanting to break down the piece to what new algorithm the composer was experimenting with. Instead we feel the sadness and other emotions the composer feels and is brave enough to share with an audience.

Mr. DuBois' piece mentioned before is a one sided interview, the composer had originally been on the tape asking questions and later on turned the places where his voice had been into more space for the music. The places where he had been are still felt in the piece because you get the impression that his grandmother is speaking to someone. He made the aesthetic choice to leave his part out and to instead focus on her. Just the personal nature of this makes us applaud the composer in his dedication to her. Together, these pieces and ones like them are harder to compose aesthetically because of the emotional involvement, but many people find them easier to listen to.

4. Voice As Instrument

Voice as an instrument is easy to compose with (sometimes all you need is a microphone) and easy for the listener to recognize. The ear always comprehends the tones; no matter how interesting the technique. Composers such as Meredith Monk and Joan La Barbara are developing new concepts in voice performance, the former choosing not to use words at all. They experiment with guttural sounds, animal-like calls, and play with traditional notational vocal uses. Larry Austin's "La Barbara, The Name, The Sounds, The Music" is interesting that it is focused on an interview where the composer is asking the singer about the sound of her name. Their talk is intertwined with her interpretation of how her name should be sung. The concept of the piece is new in that it is an interview that gives the singer personality, and gives her part of the authorship of the piece. The most memorable part about it is that all of the synthesis and surrounding sound is done with her voice. Not only are we awed by the vocal capabilities of the artist, but by the compositional decisions by Mr. Austin to not cover it or manipulate it too much. Ms. LaBarbara is in effect a one-woman band and Mr. Austin freestyles her voice into a percussion instrument, bass, and rhythmical melody, shutting out the need for any other accompaniment.

5. Disembodied Voice: Gender Issues

Paul Lansky's piece, "Things She Carried" presented at last year's ICMC was a story about a woman's day and small elements of her personal life. The composition successfully keeps the audience intrigued during its one-hour time span. Mr. Lansky's prior works such as the "Idle Chatter" series provide a great foundation for the branches of voice and computer music techniques that have been written this decade. However, it was after reading a paper by Luke DuBois on the subject that an issue became apparent that I had not noticed before. It has been questioned whether or not a female can be fully understood without the sight of her in person. This is especially true in "Things She Carried" which is about details of a woman’s day, intricate things such as what she carried in her bag. By not seeing her we lose a detail of her femininity, which is more difficult for some people to deal with. This not the same as the traditional male voice is strong and carries the stature of the person with it. Also, Hannah Bosma has written several papers on the use of voice in computer music and one thing she likes to point out is that female and male voices are used in different ways. Singing, and especially singing without words used in this piece and others (such as Mr. Austin’s) is traditionally a female role. Overdubbed narration is usually a male role. Although we can find many counterexamples, for the most part what she has pointed out is true.
However, one finds a narration of whichever gender a way for us to use our imaginations in the same way children do when listening to recorded story books. We have no person that we visually associate with the disembodied voice. Without us actually seeing the speaker, we have more room for our imaginations to run wild, to place an imaginary character, or even ourselves in the person’s shoes, making the listening experience an adventure.

6. New Category

The use of narration in a piece separates it into a new listening category. The placement of a story line for the listener to follow makes it a different experience for us to understand. By placing it in a different classification, we are giving the composers more room for expansion- by letting them know that the compositional method is accepted and understood, and quite blatantly, that we want more of it. It is much easier to compose for a category. We may see composers put extra effort into the way the spoken words are made into a story, or woven into a story, such as in Chris Bailey’s piece. We may see more of an emergence of improvisation using real time instruments and actors and see more computer music for theatre. At the very least, we will see an expansion from it being a “different” method of composition to differences inside itself as a style.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I examined the popularity of voice in computer music, as a narrative tool and as an instrument. Voice has become an instrument of choice for a special reason: it is easily recognized and comprehended by the listener. Any sound created by a machine or even sounds sampled off of acoustic instruments such as a drum or violin can be difficult for the listener to place. Voice is more easily recognizable and is still a raw tool in that its instrumental value has been popular throughout history, yet its uses are always being expanded.

New styles of speech in computer music are developing, humorous and emotional, as basis of pieces and as accents to meaning. I think that the more we use speech in electronic music, the more it will become accepted as an artistic style, and the more progressions and transformations. From Charles Dodge’s “Speech Songs” using linear pitch coding we have come a long way, with more theatrical developments such as Paul Lansky’s work and the more personal style of Mary Simoni and Luke DuBois. In the future we hopefully will see more experimentation with live real time performances and actors, more software that does speech analysis, and more acceptance of the more personal compositions, as well as many more variations.

References


Listening credits


Bailey, Christopher. "Ow, My Head"(1996)

Lansky, Paul. "Things She Carried"(1997)

Simoni, Mary. "Eulogy".