MUSICAL CULTURES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Female Voice in the Twentieth Century

MATERIAL, SYMBOLIC AND AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS

Edited by
Serena Facci and Michela Garda

ROUTLEDGE

The Female Voice in the Twentieth Century

By integrating theoretical approaches to the female voice with the musicological investigation of female singers' practices, the contributors to this volume offer fresh viewpoints on the material, symbolic and cultural aspects of the female voice in the twentieth century. Various styles and genres are covered, including Western art music, experimental composition, popular music, urban folk and jazz. The volume offers a substantial and innovative appraisal of the role of the female voice from the perspective of twentieth-century performance practices, the centrality of female singers' experimentations and extended vocal techniques along with the process of the 'subjectivisation' of the voice.

Serena Facci is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology and Popular Music Studies at the University of Rome 'Tor Vergata'. Her fieldwork and research projects include traditional and popular music in Italy and in Central-East Africa, and intercultural music making in educational and religious contexts.

Michela Garda has a philosophical and musicological background. She teaches Musical Aesthetics and Sociology of Music at the Department of Musicology and Cultural Heritage, University of Pavia.

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Michela Garda has a philosophical and musicological background. She teaches Musical Aesthetics and Sociology of Music at the Department of Musicology and Cultural Heritage, University of Pavia. In 2006, she was Visiting Fellow at Princeton University and gave lectures in Kofu, Bern, Zürich, Strasbourg, Chicago and Tel Aviv. She is the author of two books: *Musica sublime. Metamorfosi di un'idea nel Settecento musicale* (1995) and *L'estetica musicale del Novecento. Tendenze e problemi* (2007). Among her recent publications is *Registrare la performance. Testi, modelli, simulacri tra memoria e immaginazione*, (ed. with Eleonora Rocconi, Pavia University Press, 2016).

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has recently completed a book on staging opera's voices. Grover-Friedlander has published several articles, among them: 'Setting the Stage, Staging the Voice' *Qui Parle*, Vol. 21/1, 2012 (co-authored with Eli Friedlander); 'Voice' in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*; 'Transformations of a Killing of a Boy: Weill and Brecht's *Der Jasager*', in *Opera's Obedient Daughter*, ed. Sabine Lichtenstein (Rodopi, 2014); 'Passing into Another: Berio's *Cronaca del luogo* on the Threshold of Dramaturgy' (L'Harmattan, 2016). Michal Grover-Friedlander has been a visiting scholar at Princeton University; Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; School for Criticism and Theory at Cornell University; Institute for Advanced Study at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem; Institute for Advanced Study and Institute for Research in Opera and Music Theatre at Waseda University, Tokyo. Michal Grover-Friedlander is also an opera director and artistic founder and manager of the opera group *TA OPERA ZUTA* specialising in contemporary opera and music theatre. She has directed in Israel, Italy, Germany and Japan.

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Preface

The voice has long been at the centre of a complex debate in philosophy and literary studies, with essential contributions derived from Lacanian thought. This discussion was developed in the 1980s and continued through the first decade of the twenty-first century, from Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, to Adriana Cavarero and Mladen Dolar. Alongside the theoretical approaches, the voice has been at the core of countless investigations in many intersecting fields (anthropology, ethnomusicology and musicology, poetry, theatre, opera, cinema, performance and, recently, voice studies). Within this consideration, the concept of the voice has been articulated in a field characterised by the tension between opposing categories: vocal/semantic, oral/written, presence/absence, cultural/individual. Furthermore, the female voice has been invoked as a concrete metaphor for various symbolic values of the voice that can be summed up in the polarity of maternal proximity and seductive threat.

Vocal practices in the twentieth century are deeply embedded in the transformations of traditional patriarchal society and the modernisation process, at the same time being a result and a powerful agency in this process. Beyond theoretical speculation, a discussion about the reasons for this centrality of the female voice in musical cultures is still absent.

In the past century, the female voice was a catalyst for expressive innovation and experimentation in art music. The vocal works of composers such as Debussy, Schoenberg, Boulez, Berio, Cage, Nono, Bussotti all testify to this. At the same time, a new sort of self-reflexive voice was established, from opera singers like Maria Callas to experimental ones like Cathy Berberian, Carla Henius, Liliana Poli, Dorothy Dorow, Catherine Geyer, Carol Plantamura and Michiko Hirayama. Many of them challenged, in various ways, the traditional division of labour between performer and composer. The first and second generation of vocal performer/composer/producer (Joan La Barbara, Meredith Monk, Fátima Miranda and Diamanda Galás, to name but a few) is mainly female, with the important exception of Demetrio Stratos.

Across genres, the push towards emancipation and innovation has manifested itself in the construction and promotion, on the part of the singers, of an individual and specific vocality. This trend towards the subjectivisation of the voice

has profoundly changed the previous role of the singer as an ideal representative of a tradition and a style. It has established itself since the beginning of the century across and beyond the Western world, when new forms of production and the mediatised diffusion of music promoted female singers as protagonists in emerging repertoires of popular music not only in major cities such as Paris and New York, but also in others such as Naples and, as we will see in this book, Cairo.

The number of recordings by female singers during the twentieth century highlights the variety of their vocal approaches as well as their increasing role and dominance in the global market. At the same time, access to the technology of recording, amplifying and manipulating vocal sounds helped all singers, particularly the female ones, to command and create their new vocal expressions. Control, in a creative way, of one's own vocal abilities has given singers an artistic authority that competes with that of composers and assigns them exemplary roles in the reconsideration of some social and political behaviour. In this sense, the voice of many female singers has become an authority and a model in areas that also transcend their roles, such as political and social ones. A paradigmatic example is Nina Simone. Over the last 20 years, she has become an iconic figure for the emancipatory and progressive power of the voice. Along with singers like Mahalia Jackson and Abbey Lincoln, Simone is still an inspiring voice in recent decades of social turmoil. She raises fundamental questions for scholars about the entanglement of voice, gender and race including vocal forms of resistance and refusal.

This book positions itself across conceptualisations of the female voice and historical accounts of case studies from various vocal practices: opera, experimental music, vocal performance art, jazz, popular music and folk revival. It tackles theoretical questions about the female lineage of the voice and its symbolic potential through cultural topics and operatic interpretations of ancient myths (Cavarero, Grover-Friedlander), explores how the female voice has been the catalyst for compositional innovation (Johnson), vocal experimentation (Beghelli, Garda, Rizzardi), how it emancipated itself at the dawn of the modernisation process (Danielson) and became a 'voice' in the social and political arena (Feldman, Brown, Facci). The materiality of the voice, its unique 'grain', is a common thread in many chapters, as well as the role of technology in the development of vocal practices. The usage of re-mediations has been a vantage point to address the transformations of the female voice throughout the century (Karantonis).

The editors are grateful to all those who have helped during the various stages of this project. Gianmario Borio proposed the idea of investigating the female voice and has been an invaluable interlocutor. From the organisation of the conference 'The Female Voice in the Twentieth Century: Material, Cultural and Symbolic Aspects', which took place in Venice on 16–18 March 2018, to the completion of this book, he has supported us throughout the whole process. We wish to express our gratitude to the authors, who participated in the conference, enriched the discussion with their different perspectives and methodologies and contributed to the reworking of the original project into a book. We will always

cherish the inspiring experience of walking through the fascinating arcades of the Fondazione Cini, with echoes from the discussions after the sessions were finished. Warm thanks to Alessandra Ciucci and Alessandro Bratus for their numerous suggestions; to Ellise Fuchs and Karen Outtrup for their linguistic assistance; and, last but not least, to Sally Davies, who painstakingly re-read and checked the manuscript.

Serena Facci and Michela Garda

Part 1

The ‘voice’ and the voices: definitions, iconologies, myths and practices

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1 Vocalising honey

Adriana Cavarero

In the *Odyssey* (12.187), Homer tells us that the songs of the sirens are honey-voiced, *meligerun*. And the same holds true for the voice of the Muse, which, according to Pindar, produces honey-voiced hymns through the singing of the poet (*Isthmian* 2.4). This image is commonplace in ancient Greek poetry and calls on an interesting metaphor: the female singing voice, be it the voice of female monsters like the sirens or divine female creatures like the Muses, is as sweet as honey. The metaphor is inherited by the entire Western tradition which, by insisting on the bond between the poets and the female voice that inspires them, continues to associate their effect with the bodily pleasure of honey. However, it would be far too difficult an enterprise to explore the long history of the metaphor, rich as it is with variations and adaptations. Thus, I would rather limit my investigation to delving a little into the metaphor's apparent simplicity, so as to test the empirical basis its intelligibility is supposed to rely on. As is well known, metaphors make sense because of their capacity to relate to common experience, let us say to empirical reality. Well, I suspect that the metaphor in question fails to respect this canon. Something, at least at the empirical level of intelligibility, does not work; it is as if a key piece of the construction were missing. To briefly anticipate my thesis, I think that this key piece relates to the relationship between mother and child: the removal of this relationship from the traditional imagery of the honeyed female voice results in strange symptoms of unrealistic traits that affect the metaphor's intelligibility.

In my book *For More Than One Voice* (Cavarero 2005), by pondering on the phenomenon of the devocalisation of logos within the Western metaphysical tradition, I have argued that the embodiment of the voice symbolised by female figures ought to be inscribed in the classic phallogocentric opposition which poses woman as body and man as mind. The metaphor that bonds voice and honey reiterates this scenario and enriches it with a crucial and regularly upsetting element: the mother. To put it simply, even if the metaphor removes the maternal figure from the imaginary that sustains it, for this imaginary to work meaningfully, what is at stake is the bodily pleasure given by the mother to the child, a mother whose voice for the child, like her milk, tastes as sweet as honey. It is not only a question of poems or songs inspired by the sirens or the Muse but, first and foremost, of maternal vocality consisting of pleasurable rhythmic waves in which, for the

child, sounds mix with suction. Embedded in the musicality of every language and exalted by poetry, these honeyed waves come from a maternal body: the primary nutritive and vocalic source. Helene Cixous refers to this source when she says:

> there is a language that I speak or that speaks to me in all tongues. A language at once unique and universal that resounds in each national tongue when a poet speaks it. In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know, I don't need to enter it; it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious.
>
> (Cixous 1986: 32)

It is worth noting how, in Cixous' text, the old metaphor immediately acquires a genuine materiality, perhaps the very materiality which poets call on – as it were, unconsciously – when they speak of honey-voiced verses that flow from the mouth of the Muse to the mouth of the poet and pour into the ears of the listeners. Indeed, to some extent, by mentioning the mother, Cixous does help us to believe poets and singers when they affirm that, in the vocality of all tongues, there is honey that mouths taste and take delight in, corporeally. That is, the delicate but voracious mouths of children take delight in it, of course. Perhaps in every poet there is a child, as Plato would claim with justified alarm and concern. Although I am very interested in the topic of Plato's aversion for poets and mothers, I am not going to focus on it now; I will tackle it later. Now, I am going to leave the ancient Greek world aside, and pay a visit, along with the children mentioned above, to the Hebrew tradition. Not by chance, Cixous herself is Jewish, and after all, to quote Hannah Arendt's words, 'the distinction between a Hebrew truth, which was heard, and the Greek vision of the truth' (Arendt 1981: 111) looks inevitably promising for speculation on the vocal-aural realm. And, not surprisingly, for the topic of honey too.

Let me begin with a remarkable page from the novel that won the Prix de Goncourt in 1959, *The Last of the Just*, written by André Schwarz-Bart, whose Polish Jewish family was murdered by the Nazis. In the novel, a Hebrew legend frames the story of the Levy family over eight centuries, and the author tells of the method adopted by old Mordecai to give his little grandson Ernie a Jewish education while making learning enjoyable. 'From Poland' Mordecai

> had sent for a Hebrew alphabet in relief; he initiated the little angel through the mouth, that ancestral method which is so sweet and pleasant; covered with honey, the rosewood characters were simply given to the young student of the Law to suck. Later on, when Ernie was capable of reading brief phrases, Mordecai offered them molded on cakes.
>
> (Schwarz-Bart 2000: 138)

Within the Jewish tradition, this ingenious method goes back to medieval Germany or France, when on the morning of the spring festival of Shavuot, children were taken to school for the first time and participated in a special ceremony.

According to the description of the ritual, 'the boy is seated on the teacher's lap and the teacher shows him a tablet on which the Hebrew alphabet has been written'; then 'the teacher reads the letters first forward, then backwards, and finally in symmetrical paired combination, and he encourages the boy to repeat each sequence aloud'; at that point, the tablet is covered with honey and given to the child to lick. Cakes on which biblical verses have been written and boiled eggs on which more verses have been inscribed are also brought in: 'the teacher reads the words written on the cake and eggs, and the boy imitates what he hears and then eats them both' (Markus 1996: 13).

There is evidently an essential connection between the written letters the boy licks with his tongue and the audible sound vocalised by his mouth. In the Polish version, mentioned in André Schwarz-Bart's novel, this structural link between letters and mouth becomes even more significant and strengthens the link's material, bodily aspect. Rather than sticking out his tongue and licking a written slate covered with honey, little Ernie sucks the carved rosewood characters: he puts them in his mouth, the same mouth that, by repeating the sound of each character, re-vocalises the alphabet and the written text. Written characters and voice interlock in a perfect circularity, and this very circularity, acting through the child's mouth as both the site of taste buds and the organ of phonation, consists of the pleasure of honey.

Of course, just like little Ernie in the novel, Jewish children growing up in a religious family hear and repeat words or phrases of the Torah by listening to their relatives' prayers long before their ritual initiation. From infancy, they hear and utter sounds of a language they do not understand. Theirs is an acoustic and vocal experience indifferent to, or separate from, the dimension of meaning. Centred on the children's act of vocalising sounds through repetition, and tasting alphabetic characters through licking and sucking, the ritual leaves the dimension of meaning aside, too. Even though reading, reciting and understanding the Torah is, of course, the essential core of Jewish education, during the ceremony that inaugurates this process of education, special focus is put on the primary role of the mouth as the bodily site where the holy language's vocalised sounds and written characters converge. What matters most here are sounds and characters, the alphabet in its sonorous and written expression, not meaning. The child's mouth emits the sound and tastes the letters, licks, sucks, eats them, just like the prophet Ezekiel ate the scroll given to him by God.

We read in the Bible that Ezekiel was sent by God to speak to the sons of Israel. God handed him a scroll on which lamentations, mourning and woes were written. Thus goes the text:

> He said to me, 'Mortal, eat what is offered you; eat this scroll and go speak to the House of Israel'. So I opened my mouth, and He gave me the scroll to eat, as He said to me, 'Mortal, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give you'. I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey to me.
>
> (Ezekiel 3: 1–3)

The scroll is not covered with honey; it tastes as sweet as honey. During the ritual of Shavuot, Ezekiel's experience of taste is translated into the material fact that