CAROLYN ABBATE

Unsung Voices

Opera and Musical Narrative
in the Nineteenth Century

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Carolyn Abbate

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For LCM

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PREFACE

In *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, Catherine Clément argues that women are killed off by the operatic plots they occupy so that their dangerous energy, contained by death, will be rendered innocuous.[1] The male observer, from his place in the audience, can thus gaze both upon these women and upon their defeat: a comforting pastime. A telling critique of Clément's thesis, however, comes from just such a male operagoer, Paul Robinson, who pointed out that in focusing on the women's fatal defeat by operatic plots, Clément neglected their triumph: the sound of their singing voices. This sound is (as he indicated) unconquerable; it cannot be concealed by orchestras, by male singers, or—in the end—by murderous plots. Robinson hears opera in a way that has nothing to do with the events that its libretto depicts; he hears it as sonorous texture, and he redirects our attention from opera's representation of dramatic action toward one aspect of its musical body.[2] His point was that women (though he could be speaking of any operatic character, regardless of apparent or real gender) tend to be interpreted as they are represented in plots: what is neglected is their voice, how the voice is depicted, how it is put to work—in the end, how this undefeated voice speaks across the crushing plot.

I start with this image of woman undone by plot yet triumphant in voice in order to underline a position taken in my own book, which explores the idea of voice. I deal not with the feminine but with music itself, which is caught in much the same matrix as Clément's operatic Woman. Music, conventionally defined in terms of its events (and often its plot), also sets forth speaking and singing voices. Plotted explanations of music—conceptualizations of music as process or series of events—are a familiar form of music-analytical discourse.[3] The metaphor of music singing, having a voice, though a commonplace of nineteenth-century musical aesthetics, is today more unusual; it is most familiar to Anglo-American readers from Edward Cone's 1974 book *The Composer's Voice*.[4]

For those outside music criticism, insistence upon voice may seem like painting the lily. Music has a voice whenever the human voice sings. What I mean by "voice" is, of course, not literally vocal performance, but rather a sense of certain isolated and rare gestures in music, whether vocal or nonvocal, that may be perceived as modes of subjects' enunciations.[5] By emphasizing voice, I hope to help restore

to music criticism a sense for the *physical* force of music; music—like the human speaking voice—has the capacity to assail us with its sheer sound. This emphasis also facilitates a critical move from the monological authority of "the Composer," since what I mean by "voices" are potentially multiple musical voices that inhabit a work—not the creative efforts of the historical author, or even the utterance of a virtual author. This particular interpretive bias, of course, emphasizes music as embodied within the live performance of a work. Although I do not discuss (except in short asides) specific performers or performances, my discussion of performance in its figural sense—as the sound, through time, made by musical voices—may serve as a necessary reminder that music is written by a composer, but made and given phenomenal reality by performers. For this reason, I explore (if briefly) areas of literary criticism that focus on performance and voice, and that exploit assumptions about how *music* works to interpret literary texts.

This idea of voice is also unfolded within a more specific context: the question of music's narrativity. If we speak of music as "narrative," we realize that the word is metaphorical. Yet since the nineteenth century, musical works have been described as "narrative" and the word catches our attention. What does this mean? For what musical element, structure, gesture, effect, or device is "narrative" a satisfying descriptive characterization? In Chapter 1, a theoretical meditation on voice that also prepares my discussions of narrativity, I claim that "narrative" has generally been defined, since the nineteenth century, in terms of an analogy between certain linear elements of music (music proceeds through time, generates expectations based on one's instantaneous mental comparisons of music being heard with known types or paradigms, has tensions and resolutions, is a succession of sonic events that moves toward closure) and the events in a dramatic plot; that is, music has been perceived as enactment, as analogous to the event-sequences of theatrical or cinematic narrative. But, as I will argue, this analogy—while it has generated fascinating interpretive retellings—has its limitations. Chapter 1 looks in a general way at comparisons between music and narrative, examining interpretations from the nineteenth to the late twentieth century that, regardless of their differing vocabularies and methodological moves, tend to espouse this event-centered conceptual structure.

Where we can show that these analogies are arbitrary (in the broad linguistic sense), that alone is not reason for suggesting alternatives: all words about music are in that sense arbitrary: verbal constructions (themselves reflecting some cognitive configuration) placed upon mu-

sical reality that will seem, to a given listener, to assume a similar shape. Put another way, verbally couched interpretations of music are performances and can only be more or less convincing.[6] Indeed, in Chapter 2, in the course of reading Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, I play a game with associations between sonorous events and narratological concepts, promising first this and then that musical equivalent for ideas such as "plot," "character," "cardinal function," "discourse," and the like. The money—an unambiguous ontology that identifies a given musical fact as *being* narrative—is pushed toward the reader, but then raked away again. A croupier's strategy like this one involves a tease, but it was chosen precisely for its capacity to demonstrate the limitations of arguments that propose analogies.

My reasons for moving beyond narrative as event-sequence and a plot-concept of music's narrativity nonetheless had nothing to do with the insecure nature of verbal imaginings to which the confrontation gives rise. That insecurity is endemic to interpreting music, endemic to my own readings, and I prefer to accept these uncertainties as a source of pleasure, rather than fear them as inimical to interpretive control. Musical narrative as a musical plot does nonetheless seem to me limited in certain ways; as paradoxical as the formulation may sound, one of its *limitations* is its interpretive *promiscuity*. Broad definitions of narrative (narrative as any event-sequence, or as any text that induces mental comparisons with a paradigm, for instance) are so broad as to enable almost all music, all parts of any given work, to be defined as narrative. Put bluntly: how much intellectual pleasure do we derive from a critical methodology that generates such uniformity and becomes a mere machine for naming any and all music? Is there no difference between narrative and nonnarrative music, as there is between text genres? My assumption was rather that music will have its nonnarrative expanses as well as its moments of narration (in which, so to speak, speakers' fantasies about causes, effects, and explanations create and fill out temporal gaps).[7] The notion of musical narration should, then, also raise questions about the contexts in which narration occurs, about narration's moral or performative suasions. I believe that the pleasures of narrational interpretation derive precisely from awakening a "second hearing" that enables us to sense *when* (for it happens but rarely) music can be heard as narrating, and more than this, to be aware of complex assumptions that encourage us to perceive such moments as narration.

To this end, I maintain certain distinctions throughout this book. Music is seen not merely as "acting out" or "representing" events as if it were a sort of unscrolling and noisy tapestry that mimes actions not visually but sonically, but also as occasionally respeaking an object

in a morally distancing act of narration. Music has (in other words) moments of diegesis—musical voices that distance us from the sensual matter of what we are hearing, that speak across it. In both novels and film, the presence of this diegetic subject (even if that subject is deemed, as it were, at present absent) is taken for granted. It was precisely because most theorists of narrative had *denied* such a presence in music that I (in contrary fashion) wondered what would ensue if one listened for the sound of that voice.[8] My readings of Delibes, Mozart, Strauss, Dukas, Mahler, and Wagner attempt to recognize both voice and narrative acts in music, to identify when and by what means music narrates, and to suggest that such *loci* are far from being normal or universal. They are disruptive and charged with a sense of both distance and difference: narrating in music will contain elements of the fantastic. Certain nineteenth-century works can thus be conceived as oscillating between a normal musical state (*unscrolling*, which may well be described in terms of events, tonal unwindings, thematic development, or the like) and rarer moments of narrating. In Chapter 2, for instance, I associate this effect of narrating in Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* with a sense of narrative synthesis, a musical moment that reinterprets musical actions from a time already finished. These issues are taken up in many forms throughout the course of the book, which seeks this discursive distance or zone of noncongruence in music—whether it be a metaphysical abstraction like that developed in the preceding paragraphs, or the noncongruence of libretto and music in opera, or the noncongruence of gestures of narrating with some otherwise coherent piece that sets them forth.

The notion of music's narrativity, we can see, inevitably rebounds upon the larger questions raised by the general idea of musical voices: are the events of music simply *there*, or do we occasionally sense within them the voices of commentators that enunciate them? Does not the very notion of a musical work *narrating* construct a speaking presence behind that moment? I am not merely saying, of course, that some historical individual (Delibes, or Mahler) had to have organized sonorous thought into a piece, or even that we always assume that some virtual author created the sounds we hear. Yet in music above all—because music is live and present sonority—we cannot allude to narrative, yet elude voices by assuming a single speaker and dismissing him or her as identical to the author, by evoking the linguistics of Benveniste's "events that speak themselves,"[9] by making gestures toward poststructuralist characterizations of the subject as mere delusion, or simply by moving from the historical individual who wrote the piece to the piece itself as his dramatization, with

themes as characters or actants, dissonant cadences as cardinal crises. I make a different, deliberately prosopopoeiac swerve; in effect I endow certain isolated musical moments with faces, and so with tongues and a special sonorous presence. I construct voices out of musical discourse. The questions that concerned me are: How does this constructed "they" seem to speak? Why do we hear them? What is their force? Precisely which musical gestures can be read as betraying their presence? All six of the succeeding chapters attempt to recover these voices, which—hence one sense of my title—have to me been overlooked, unsung. Sensitivity to this constructed presence means possessing that "second hearing" (an aural form of "second sight"), which reanimates, I hope, a sense for what is uncanny in music.

My speculation on voice (perhaps not surprisingly) weaves through an argument, set forth chiefly in Chapters 3 through 6, about the role of opera in creating modes of enunciated narration in music. The earlier nineteenth century saw expansion of scenes of dramatic action and narrative exposition in Romantic opera; formal and gestural experiments typical of musical modes for these scenes have long been considered one impetus for the overtly dramatic symphonic literature of the mid- to late nineteenth century.[10] Nineteenth-century opera, however, informed not only nineteenth-century symphonic music, but the writing of musical criticism as well. We could go even farther, and argue that opera—in which musical gestures are overtly and directly associated with brash, often melodramatic events—helped to engender our cultural tendency (endemic since the nineteenth century) to read dramas and plots into music, and to use dramatic and narrative metaphors in writing about music. Such large historical claims always seem banal, and I am deferring consideration of this one to some later time. I do, however, argue for one smaller point: that marks of musical narrating, as they existed in opera, can be revoiced in instrumental works of the late nineteenth century. In Chapter 4, one of Mahler's instrumental works (the *Todtenfeier* movement of the Second Symphony) is interpreted not as *plot*, but rather as enfolding the displacements typical of a certain operatic plot and operatic narrating voices alike within its symphonic march mode.

Richard Wagner figures importantly in these speculations. He included extensive scenes of narration and retrospection in his operas, and this alone set him apart from the librettists and composers who were his contemporaries. In Chapter 3, which discusses a theory of reflexivity in operatic narration, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* are seen as summarizing and exploding historical conventions for the music traditionally associated with narrative scenes in Mozartean and Romantic opera. Chapters 5 and 6 concern the *Ring*, and the

immense complexities of its layered narrations. I suggest that the *Ring* contains musical narration that may speak both with and *across* the text, furnishing us with the opportunity to hear many narrating voices (both textual and musical), to separate the conflicting lines. Through repeated offerings of such polyphonic narration, Wagner undercuts the very notion of music as a voice whose purity is assured by virtue of its nonverbal nature. In Chapter 5, the history of the *Ring*'s genesis is set against a reception history of its narrative passages; both histories are critical to reading the longest narration—Wotan's Monologue in *Die Walküre*—as an enunciation emanating both textually *and musically* from Wotan, and hence as music that is itself unreliable. Chapter 6 returns to voice in a more general sense, in considering Brünnhilde, whose incarnation in the *Ring* is extremely complex. Her progressively developed hyperacusis for truth means that she can split both words and music into cross-talking strains. Yet even as the *Ring* foregrounds the hearing of this single character, it repeats a scene of narrating-as-lying (characters and music appear to describe *incorrectly* or differently certain events that we ourselves have witnessed) to become a morally radical work. The *Ring* undercuts security in the narrating voice even when that voice is musical, thus contradicting Wagner's own (Schopenhauerian) position on music as an untainted and transcendent discourse. Chapter 6 ends with Brünnhilde herself (not in her identity as a plot-character, but as what I call "voice-Brünnhilde") exemplifying Wagner's secret refusal of a Romantic tradition of musical metaphysics that originates with Rousseau and is still in force today.[11]

What unites the theoretical and historical strains of the book is a certain thematic concentration on voice, and on moments of noncongruence in opera and instrumental music. But I hope also to communicate an awareness of the difficulties of writing about music and hence of moving from a purely sonorous language to a discursive metalanguage. The metaphorical status of all words about music is not always self-consciously recognized by its interpreters. Music critics, analysts, and theorists often either imply or state outright that their "words about music" represent "what the composer" or "what musicians at the time" considered significant in a given work, thus at once invoking an authority that is not completely ours to possess and adopting a "poietic"[12] or "emic" strategy (reconstruction of the cultural or historical context that determined the work's production) to buttress interpretation. Many choose, on the other hand, to practice a form of musical New Criticism, to push aside genetic or historical considerations, and rest content in the faith that a particular analysis addresses some quality or configuration immanent in the work, a con-

figuration subject only to a process of discovery that—though mediated by and couched in verbal terms—is assumed to be uncorrupted by culture or language.[13] Both are, needless to say, utopian visions of interpretive certainty. There is nothing immanent in a musical work (beyond the material reality of its written and sonic traces), and our perceptions of forms, configurations, meanings, gestures, and symbols are always mediated by verbal formulas, as on a broader scale by ideology and culture.[14] I have tried to embrace and acknowledge the perils of interpretation, while remaining aware of two historical contexts for what I write: that of the music, and that of my own interpretive claims. Chapter 1 attempts, though only briefly, to situate the act of writing about music within both historical traditions of musical aesthetics and philosophy, and contemporary critical issues. Yet speaking and writing about music should concern not only music critics (historians, analysts, and theorists), but all those involved with the human sciences and caught up in fraught debates on the nature of interpretation. Music, for many, is the sound over which one swoons once the thoughtful labors of the day are done—but if so music brings an ambiguous comfort. Far from being a refuge from worldly questions of meaning, it is the beast in the closet; seemingly without any discursive sense, it cries out the problems inherent in critical reading and in interpretation as unfaithful translation. For interpreting music involves a terrible and unsafe leap between object and exegesis, from sound that seems to signify nothing (and is nonetheless splendid) to words that claim discursive sense but are, by comparison, modest and often unlovely. What is lost in the jump is what we all fear: what must remain unsaid.

. . .

Unsung Voices began as a project on Wagner's operatic narratives; discussions with Reinhold Brinkmann, Harold Powers, and the late Carl Dahlhaus shaped this initial phase, which was supported by an NEH Fellowship in 1986–1987. Dr. Manfred Eger and Herr Gunter Fischer of the Richard-Wagner-Archiv in Bayreuth put a number of manuscripts at my disposal, and Egon Voss, Isolde Vetter, and Christa Jost at the Richard-Wagner-Ausgabe in Munich listened encouragingly to assorted Wagnerian speculations. The book's mutation into a broader theoretical study began right away: parts were presented as lectures in 1987 and 1988; I thank Lorenzo Bianconi, director of the Bologna IMS Conference, Steven Paul Scher, director of the Conference on Music and the Verbal Arts at Dartmouth, and Esther Cavett-Dunsby, director of the Oxford Conference on Music

Analysis, for chance to try them out, and Hermann Danuser, Gary Tomlinson, and David Osmond-Smith for their comments on these lectures. Anthony Newcomb and Karol Berger kindly invited me to participate in a symposium on narrative and music at Stanford and Berkeley in May 1988; stimulating live exchanges on that occasion are echoed in small bursts throughout this book. My students at Princeton and in visiting seminars at Stony Brook and the University of Pennsylvania were instrumental in helping me to spin out my ideas; Carlo Caballero, Rose Mauro, and Sanna Pederson in particular have enriched my work in many ways. One of my students, Alice Clark, also served as an invaluable research assistant. Certain aspects of the book's theoretical bias go back many years to discussions with Edward Cone; his presence in these pages is a measure of my debt to his unique music-analytical vision. Walter Lippincott, Director of Princeton University Press, was wise enough to suggest that interpreting the *Ring* should periodically be refreshed by attendence at its performance.

Roger Parker, my collaborator in other operatic fantasies, read the entire manuscript in an early draft and helped me to hear my own voice more clearly, as did Arthur Groos and John Deathridge. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (whose command of the music-language trope is unrivaled) also read this draft, and discussed it in the course of many telephoned and polyglot conversations. Joseph Kerman, Sander Gilman, and Garrett Stewart commented on versions of what became Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6. Since any undertaking that drifts (like this one) outside institutional boundaries means frequent demands for information and direction, I am especially indebted to those in other fields who took an interest in the project—above all Caryl Emerson, whose literary imagination meshes with devotion to music in unique ways, and with whom I have shared most of the work presented here.

Many other friends saw me through the task of writing, and I associate them fondly with different stages of the book's evolution: Mayen Würdig-Beckmann, Angelika Arnoldi-Livie, Bruce Livie, Marta Petrusewicz, Andreas Schulman, Naemi Stilman, Victoria Cooper, Rena Mueller, David Cannata, Linda Roesner, Edward Roesner, William Ashbrook, Margaret Cobb, and Robert Bailey. Lee Mitchell, who responded with extraordinary insight to odd ideas yet unformed, lightened the circumstances of their recomposition into this, their sturdier and physical incarnation.

Unsung Voices

MUSIC'S VOICES

WE BEGIN with a scene that explores the power of narration, by showing us how a certain Hindu priestess comes to tell the "Tale of the Pariah's Daughter":

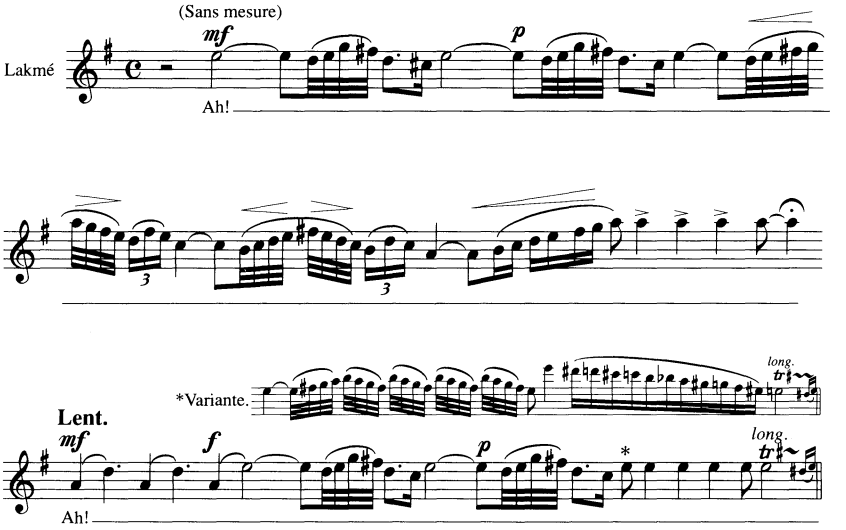
> *Nilakantha* (avec beaucoup de sentiment):
> Si ce maudit s'est introduit chez moi,
> S'il a bravé la mort pour arriver à toi,
> Pardonne-moi ce blasphème,
> C'est qu'il t'aime!
> Toi, ma Lakmé, toi, la fille des dieux.
> Il va triomphant par la ville,
> Nous allons retenir cette foule mobile.
> Et s'il te voit, Lakmé, je lirai dans ses yeux!
> Affermis bien ta voix! Sois souriante,
> Chante, Lakmé! Chante! La vengeance est là!
>
> (Les Hindous se rapprochent peu à peu.)
>
> Par les dieux inspirée,
> Cette enfant vous dira
> La légende sacrée
> De la fille du Paria . . .
>
> *Tous*: Ecoutons la légende, écoutons!
>
> *Lakmé*: Où va la jeune Indoue,
> Fille des Parias? (etc.)

[*Nilakantha* (with great emotion): If this villain has penetrated my domain, if he has defied death to come near you, forgive my blasphemy, but it is because he loves you, my Lakmé, you! You, the child of the gods! He's passing in triumph through the town, so let us gather this wandering crowd, and, if he sees you Lakmé, I shall read it in his eyes! Now steady your voice! Smile as you sing! Sing, Lakmé! Sing! Vengeance is near! (The crowd of Hindus gathers slowly around.) Inspired by the gods, this child will tell you the sacred legend of the pariah's daughter. *The Crowd*: Let's listen to the legend! Listen! *Lakmé*: Where does the young Hindu girl wander? This daughter of pariahs? (etc.)]

This is, of course, the setup for one of opera's most famous virtuoso numbers, the Bell Song from Delibes' *Lakmé*, which premiered—two months after Wagner died—in 1883. What happens in this scene will serve to underscore a series of distinctions critical to any interpretation of musical narration: plot and narrating, story and teller, utterance and enunciation.

Upon first being urged by Nilakantha to "steady your voice . . . sing" (the line is significant), Lakmé responds with a wash of wordless coloratura. This initial improvisatory vocalizing is what first fascinates the crowd, and, from their random wanderings (they are a "foule mobile"), strikes them into immobility as a closed circle of listeners. They hear a woman who transforms herself into a kind of musical instrument, a sonorous line without words and unsupported by any orchestral sound (Example 1.1). Pure voice commands instant attention (both ours and that of the onstage audience), in a passage that is shockingly bare of other sound. In opera, we rarely hear the voice both unaccompanied and stripped of text—and when we do (in the vocal cadenzas typical of Italian arias, for instance), the sonority is disturbing, perhaps because such vocalizing so pointedly focuses our sense of the singing voice as one that can compel *without* benefit of words. Such moments enact in pure form familiar Western tropes on the suspicious power of music and its capacity to move us without rational speech. Beyond this, however, this moment of initial vocali-

Example 1.1. Lakmé Act II: Lakmé's Introductory Vocalizing.



zation, with its strong phatic effect, prefigures the thrust of Lakmé's vocal performance as a whole.

In verse 1 of her song, Lakmé tells the tale of a poor girl who wanders in the woods, and in the course of her wandering encounters a stranger threatened by "fauves [qui] rugissent de joie" ["wild animals (who) roar with joy"]. She jumps in to save the stranger by charming the animals with a magic wand, decorated with a bell. In verse 2, the stranger, revealed as Vishnu, rewards her by transporting her to the heavens; the song ends with the narrator's address to the onstage audience, reminding them that "depuis ce jour au fond des bois, / Le voyageur entend parfois / Le bruit léger de la baguette / Où tinte la clochette / Des charmeurs" ["since that day, those who travel deep into the forest sometimes hear the gentle sound of the wand on which the enchanters' bell rings"].

Known now to most only as a coloratura showpiece (and one associated chiefly with such art-deco divas as Lily Pons), the Bell Song derives its name from the refrain that closes each of the two narrative verses, in which the soprano imitates, by vocalizing on open vowel sounds, the "magic bell" described in the story. (The coloratura passages in the refrain are similar to those initial improvisatory roulades that first pull the crowd.) Few are aware that the Bell Song is actually the "Légende de la fille du Paria," that it is a narrative, and that its fetishization of voice as pure sound is interwoven with the telling of a story. Nonetheless, the scene demonstrates the ways in which vocal performance will indeed overpower plot, for Gerald, the besotted British officer, is attracted not by the tale but by the voice that sings it. Gerald betrays himself involuntarily, and, acting equally against her will, Lakmé delivers an overtly seductive performance, and extracts one erotically fascinated listener from the crowd in which he hides. Implicit in all that has been said, of course, is the realization that the Bell Song is a scene of performance on two levels: a narrative performance, and a musical performance that the onstage audience can *hear as music*. The scene involves "phenomenal" performance, which might be loosely defined as a musical or vocal performance that declares itself openly, singing that is heard by its singer, the auditors on stage, and understood as "music that they (too) hear" by us, the theater audience.[1]

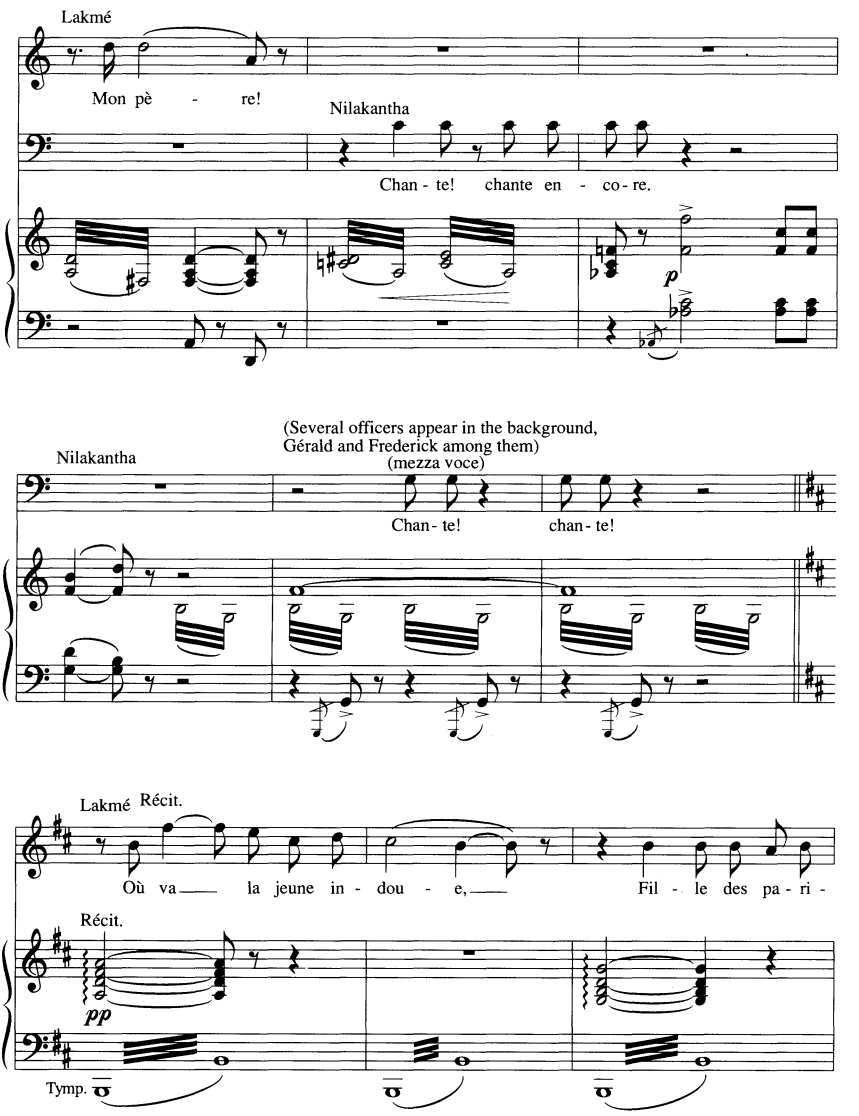
A scene of seduction, Lakmé's performance nonetheless does not seduce by means of *plot*. This by no means implies that her "tale of the pariah's daughter" is irrelevant, for in the context of the opera as a whole it might well be read as an allegory of Lakmé's own fate—eventually, she sacrifices herself to save Gerald. Nilakantha's anger at Gerald's "blasphemous pollution" of the priestess is thus assuaged by

her death, and when at the end of the opera Nilakantha cries "Elle porte là-haut nos voeux, / Elle est dans la splendeur des cieux!" ["She brings our prayers on high, she resides in the splendours of heaven"], he associates her with the transfigured maiden of her own tale. Gerald the foreigner and imperialist is at the same moment obliquely complimented by being, with Lakmé, inserted into the tale and equated with divine Vishnu (that the compliment is put in the mouth of an enraged native is one of the opera's covert means of luxuriating in its own Orientalist romance). In this allegorical role, the Bell Song represents a common operatic type, a song whose *reflexive* narrative text prefigures the plot of the opera in which it appears. Such songs generate complicated nested reflexive spheres, and their effects are discussed at greater length in Chapter 3. Within its immediate context, however, the tale that Lakmé tells *is* insignificant, for it is not the story that acts upon its listener. The act of telling it—the act of narrating—is the point.

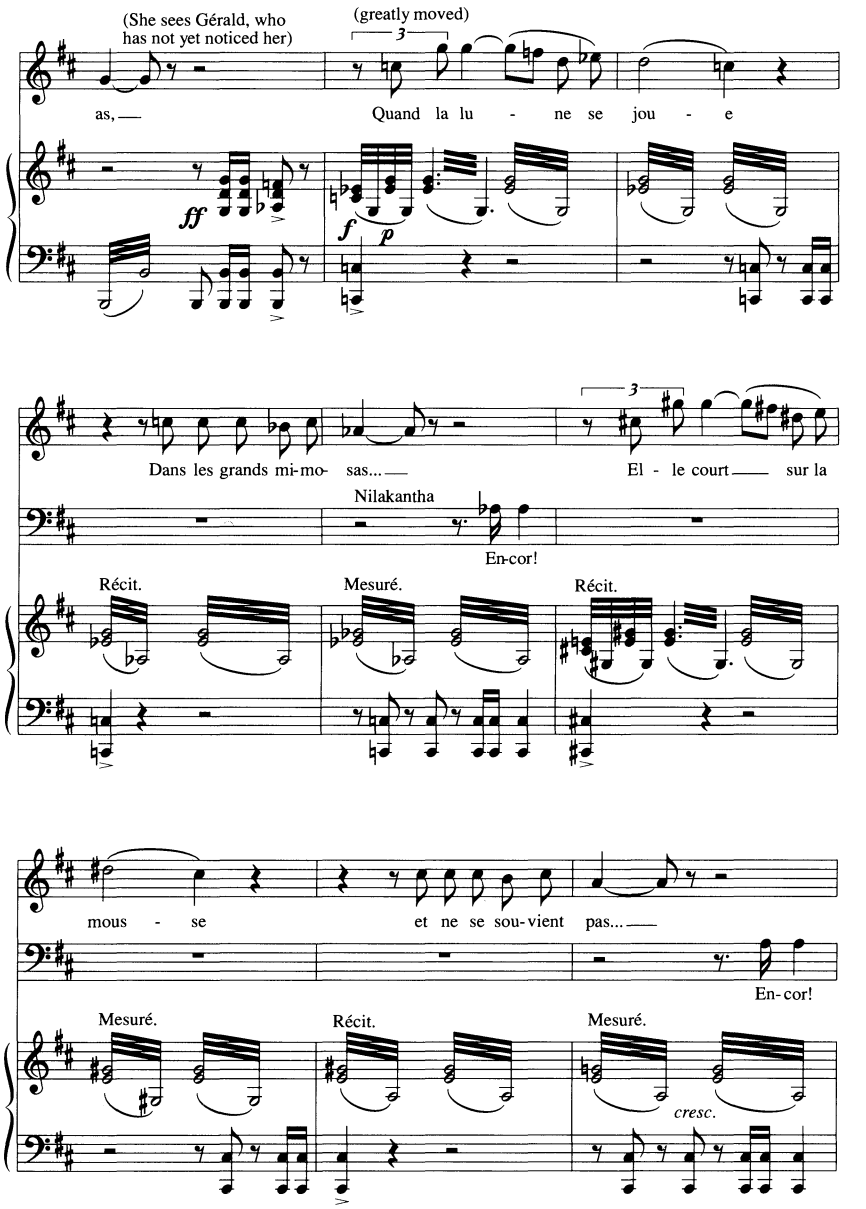
The crowd can be understood as naive listeners, as eavesdroppers or an excluded audience, for the real force of the performance—the seduction—is not meant for them. They are content with the story of the pariah's daughter—they will, as they say, "listen to the *tale*," perhaps as a simpler reader might "read for the plot." Gerald, to the contrary, is envisaged by Nilakantha as listening not to plot but to voice and performance. By urging Lakmé to "steady her voice," by repeating his exhortation "chante, chante," he seems to realize that she must become much more than a story telling itself; she must be a sheer source of sound, to attract—fatally—the attention of that single listener. Gerald's experience of the song is deemed by the scene's stage-manager to be an experience of a musical voice-object.[2] As if to confirm her own status as sonority rather than story, Lakmé produces music that might itself be regarded as *working against the story she narrates*, since the two musical verses, by remaining similar, by repeating, in some sense deny the progressive sequence of changing events that are recounted in Lakmé's words.[3]

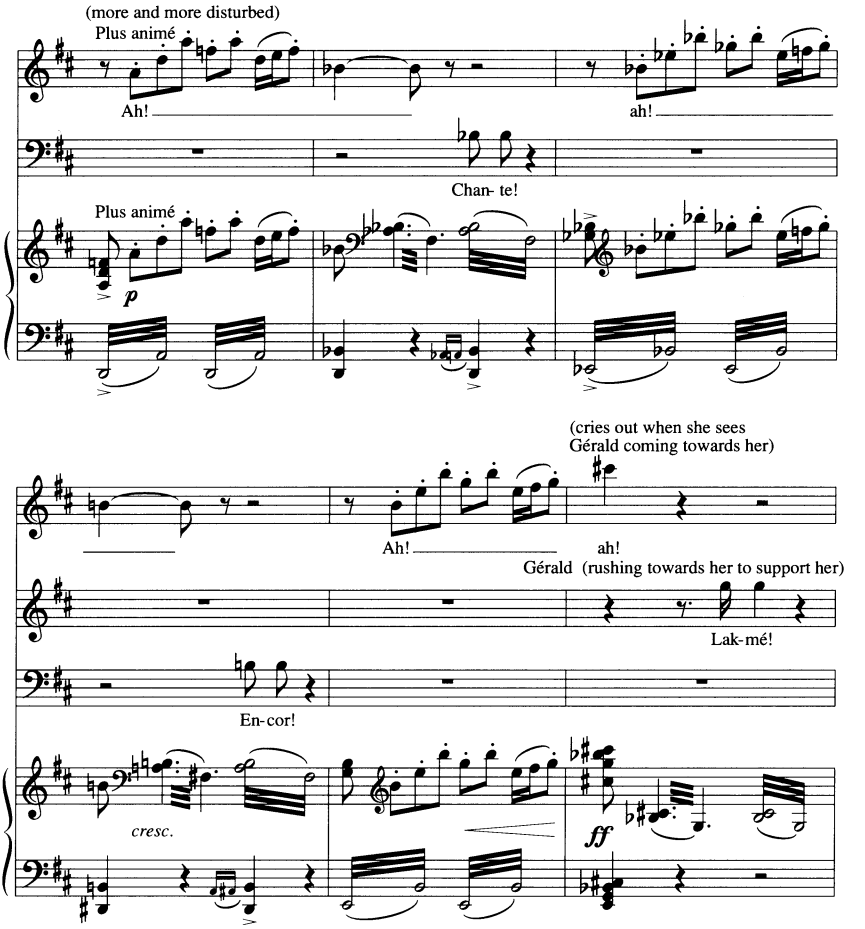
Gerald, the intended listener, is in fact never conscious of the tale (Lakmé's story of Vishnu and the pariah), because he is too far away to hear her words when Lakmé delivers her formal singing performance. When the song fails to flush his prey, Nilakantha urges Lakmé to sing again, to sing until the traitor is revealed. Lakmé, exhausted by formal performance, can no longer produce either the coherent narrative, or a whole verse of the song. She merely recapitulates textual fragments and bell sounds (Example 1.2). The broken coloratura inverts the smooth virtuosity of Lakmé's improvisatory prelude (her "steadying" of the voice), and the bell-flourishes, re-

Example 1.2. After the Bell Song.



Ex. 1.2 (cont.)


(She sees Gérald, who has not yet noticed her)
(greatly moved)
as,
Quand la lu - ne se jou - e
ff
f
p
Dans les grands mi-mo- sas...
El - le court sur la
Nilakantha
En-cor!
Récit.
Mesuré.
Récit.
mous - se
et ne se sou-vient pas...
En-cor!
Mesuré.
Récit.
Mesuré.
cresc.



peated in upward sequence as Lakmé loses control of pitch, mark the end of the performance in the face of its success (Gerald has appeared at Lakmé's side). In this epilogue, both the sequential plot described by the words of the song, and the coherent sequence of musical events in the song, have dissolved into fragments as Lakmé becomes *explicitly* a body emanating sonority. Finally, Gerald *hears*. The Bell Song's epilogue reinterprets the song, exposing plot as empty distraction, and affirming that a narrative performance can signify in ways that pass beyond the tale told. Lakmé's singing has the same perlocutionary force as a command to Gerald to reveal himself, a force not connected to the structure or the content of her story.[4]

Lakmé's performance might be conceived (though the idea deflates

the scene somewhat) as transcending certain concerns of structuralist narratology and endorsing the brief of narrative pragmatics, by demonstrating how we do well to examine narrative activities rather than the events that they describe, to examine forms of enunciation rather than forms taken by utterance. Put this way, the debate sounds merely institutional. The scene is far richer, of course, but it does enact certain oppositions and above all suggests the fascinations and complexities of *voice* in the musical work.

I

Voice is a charged word within contemporary critical theory; it is less so, naturally, in music criticism. In a musical work, voices are not easily muffled. But what are the voices that sing musical compositions? *Voices* can be understood commonsensically as the human voices of opera and song: soprano, mezzo, alto, castrato, countertenor, tenor, baritone, bass. In technical terms, voices are the individual contrapuntal lines of a polyphonic composition. Any critic of opera is aware, continually, of voices in the former sense, and is sensitive as well to their role in operative performance. An attraction to opera means an attraction to singers' voices—this goes without saying. But there is also a radical autonomization of the human voice that occurs, in varying degrees, in all vocal music. The sound of the singing voice becomes, as it were, a "voice-object" and the sole center for the listener's attention. That attention is thus drawn away from words, plot, character, and even from music as it resides in the orchestra, or music as formal gestures, as abstract shape;[5] Lakmé's performance plays out precisely this radical autonomization. When opera allows itself to project this voice-object, it also runs into peril—for, according to Michel Poizat, the "presence of the performer" may well suddenly emerge to impede the listener's contemplation. We are aware at these junctures—painfully, if the high C is missed—that we witness a performance. The membrane between the pure voice-object and the voice that we assign consciously to the virtuoso, as performance, is thus thin, and permeable. In the Queen of the Night's second aria, for instance, Poizat argues that the performer is actually forced to the foreground, because the voice-object in this extraordinary piece threatens to bear *too* great an emotional charge, to become a pure unfolded "cry."[6] For Poizat, the aria shifts constantly, every time the performance (lodged in the melismatic vocalises) parts the curtains to peep out from behind the fearful voice-object that inhabits the nonmelismatic passages. I would read the aria rather as oscillating between drama—the angry tirade by the character—and voice-object

that comes to the fore *precisely* in the melismatic vocalises, for the melismas, by splitting words ("nimmermehr," "Bande") and separating syllable from syllable, destroy language. So the Queen, by killing language, also kills plot, and herself as a character. She suddenly becomes not a character-presence but an irrational nonbeing, terrifying because the locus of voice is now not a character, not human, and somehow not present. This same uncanny effect, I would claim, can govern moments marked by a singing voice in instrumental (that is, nonvocal, textless) music. This fear— instilled by voice *without* a physically present human character—might well be kept in mind, as it is partly responsible for the penumbra of uneasiness that characterizes works such as Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (discussed in Chapter 2) and Mahler's *Todtenfeier* (Chapter 4).

In making his distinctions between vocal levels in opera, Poizat attempts to define different modes appropriate to each. The first level is a rational, text-oriented one, in which the singing voice retreats before literary elements (words, poetry, character, plot). Recitative is, of course, the best representative of this mode. The second is the level of the voice-object; the third consists of moments at which either of the first two are breached by consciousness of the real performer, of witnessing a performance. Opera actually replays these three levels within itself, within a convention that will return (in Chapter 3) as one governing sign for my speculation about music and narration: narrative songs, like Lakmé's, that are "sung within the opera"; narration that is thus also self-consciously a musical performance.

Voice in music can, however, be understood in larger senses—as the source of sonority, as a presence or resonating intelligence.[7] Voice in this sense was proposed in Edward Cone's book *The Composer's Voice*, and Cone's metaphor initiated parts of my own investigation of "voices," as well as my resistance to the centering and hegemonic authorial image of "the Composer." For Cone, the "composer's voice" is an "intelligence in the act of thinking through the musical work."[8] This voice can be distinguished from the distinctive "voice" of a vocal persona in song or opera, who is the character we assume to be speaking or singing (a wandering musician, a girl about to be married, a lover in despair). In song—and much of Cone's work draws on the *Lied* repertory—the "composer's voice" may lodge itself in the piano, and may also seem to be ordering the vocal part in ways that the "vocal persona" cannot discern. Cone's vision of voice is thus one of a virtual author,[9] and he associates voice securely with a creative mind whom we assume to have made the work as a whole. The work created by the "composer's voice" is in Cone's view essentially monologic (in the Bakhtinian sense) and monophonic—not, of course, literally

(as a one-line melody), but in that all its utterances are heard as emanating from a single composing subject. Cone's book is effective as an interpretative reanimation of ideas about musical composition, in insisting upon a conception of music as "sung" through time, as originating in an oscillating, sonorous body—both literally in performance, and figuratively, as music issuing from what might be called the composer's throat. Traditional musical analysis, with its orientation toward the notated score, has been relatively unconcerned with music as constituted through (literal or figural) performance. Cone presented an alternative, and one that will resist disconcerting questions. Some of the most disconcerting of these might indeed, come not from traditional musical analysis, with its straightforward formalist orientation, but rather from criticism of language and literature, from which Cone borrowed his "voice" in the first place. Voice, like the idea of presence, has suffered some battering at the hands of poststructuralists, through arguments that attempt to dislocate or disembody speaking subjects, in order to demonstrate how the subject is constituted through language, as a grammatical fiction. Voice, according to these writers, is unduly privileged in a metaphysical tradition that suppresses because it fears the contrary notion of inscription and text. But music's voices—unlike the voices assumed to reside in written texts, or voice as a metaphysical desideratum—cannot be summarily stilled in these terms. As a consequence of the inherently live and performed existence of music, its own voices are stubborn, insisting upon their privilege. They manifest themselves, in my interpretations, as different *kinds* or modes of music that inhabit a single work.[10] They are not uncovered by analyses that assume all music in a given work is stylistically or technically identical, originating from a single source in "the Composer."

One can assert the survival of music's "voices" in this blunt fashion because music (like theater) *is* live: it exists in present time, as physical and sensual force, something beating upon us. The text of music is a performance.[11] Thus music is fundamentally different from the written texts that have for the most part shaped critical theory.[12] (Poetry retains vestiges of live performance, and mediates between the extremes of live and unperformed written texts, as—in very different ways—does film.) So immediate and inescapable is music's assault upon us—as Mann implied in *Der Zauberberg*, it shouts to trap us in time—that we are inclined to assign it a source who speaks it. We tend to ask ourselves, even if only subliminally, where the music comes from.[13] Music is not merely a gaudy interruption of silence, which converges from ambient space. It is not a text writing itself, or historical events "speaking themselves."[14] Music originates from human

bodies. Roland Barthes, in proposing music as "carnal stereophony," wrote that music possesses

> figures of the body (the "somathemes") whose texture forms musical *signifying* (hence, no more grammar, no more musical semiology: issuing from professional analysis—identification and arrangement of "themes," "cells," "phrases"—it risks bypassing the body; composition manuals are so many ideological objects, whose meaning is to annul the body.) These figures of the body I do not always manage to name.[15]

Barthes' hearing is sensualized by his perception of what he elsewhere calls the "grain of the voice," which he describes in one passage as "the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing limb," that is, something *extra* in music (the grain) conceived as a body vibrating with musical sound—a speaking source—that is not the body of some actual performer.[16] In this he imagines the source of what I call "unsung voices."

To Cone's monologic and controlling "composer's voice," I prefer an aural vision of music animated by multiple, decentered voices localized in several invisible bodies. This vision proposes an interpretation of music shaped by prosopopoeia, the rhetorical figure that grants human presence to nonhuman objects or phenomena, and one that traditionally entails a strongly visual fantasy in which we imagine faces and eyes upon nonhuman forms. By speaking of music's "voices," we reconstrue the trope in an auralized form, in which imagining human faces or bodies means figuring forth sounds from those faces' lips and throats.[17] But whose are the bodies? As Barthes intimated, these bodies are not, of course, the persons of the instrumentalists and singers. The gesticulating performers are the proximate speakers of the music, as the immediate physical source of musical production. These "means of production" were, according to Adorno, what Wagner wanted to hide when he covered the orchestra pit at Bayreuth. Wagner's orchestration, "by transforming the unruly body of instruments into the docile palette of the composer, is at the same time a de-subjectification, since its tendency is to render inaudible whatever might give a clue to the origins of a particular sound."[18] For Adorno, naturally, this massing of orchestration, in which one never hears the solo instrument that points so rudely to the laboring individual, was coincident with the nineteenth century's ambitions to isolate art from the work that makes it.[19] Yet Adorno, by fixing obsessively on Wagner's orchestra, ignores the *singers*—but perhaps with reason, for the singers undo the Marxist shades of his interpretations. Wagner never swerved from operatic composition; he never "hid" the singers—so it is hard to claim that his operas (or any

nineteenth-century opera) attempt to evade the spectacle of *vocal* labor. Some critics have claimed that the pleasure of opera resides mainly in gawking—from a safe and comfortable distance—at such patently dangerous work.[20]

But Adorno's claim of "de-subjectification" must be interrogated as well, by distinguishing the subjects who perform (singers or instrumentalists) from the subject or subjects who speak, or more properly, "sing" the musical work. When a late twentieth-century listener hears music, he or she may well dissociate that music from human performers: it could hardly be otherwise in an era of sound reproduction or (we could now add) electronic and computer-synthesized composition, which not only hide performers but replace them entirely. Masking the performers, however, hardly shatters the subject except in the most literal way. Masking or suppressing perception of individual performers serves, in fact, to enhance a sense of the figural subject, and in Wagner's coalesced, invisible orchestra, these figural voices may indeed sound at higher volume than they might in a visibly laboring group. Adorno himself betrayed his allegiance to the subject in his imagery, by referring to the orchestra as the composer's palette (there is still a controlling intelligence who wields the brush). In the absence of a visible orchestra (even in its presence) we do hear a subject or subjects, but not merely *the composer*: rather, we hear *singers* who sing through the bodies of the sopranos, tenors, basses, violins, horns, and all the others. Subjectivity is dispersed, relocated, and made mysterious (transcendental, Wagner might have said)—but it is by no means dissolved.

Because it exists as a living sonority, music is animated by voices, and these voices do not evaporate when music confronts the insights of contemporary literary criticism, or philosophy of language. The failure of an analogy may nonetheless serve a purpose, to nudge music critics toward less impressionistic and more skeptical stances regarding the notions that they borrow from literature. *Narrative* is one of these. My claim that *voice* cannot be suppressed in speculation on music as it can in speculation on literary texts has important consequences for thinking about the links between narrative and music. The claim stems, nonetheless, from a larger ideological conviction that critical thinking about music should consider its divergences from language and written texts, as well as differences between criticism in the two domains. Too often, writing on music and literature, or on musical and literary criticism, posits simple parallels between the two arts or the two critical discourses.

As a critical strategy, any insistence that voice and presence declare themselves in nineteenth-century music will, as we have seen, run