

Barthes' "The Grain of the Voice" – a singer's perspective

My first contact with Roland Barthes was through his essay on "The Grain of the Voice", from *Image Music Text*. It was suggested to me as I was writing on the subject of a contemporary opera singer (Renee Fleming)'s most recent "crossover" album, *Dark Hope*. I did not know quite how to react to the work at the time, and "The Grain..." slipped to the rear of my consciousness. I am re-visiting it now, through the unfocused binocular lenses of professional musician and amateur (really, non-) semiotician. This essay, written by an amateur musician and professional semiotician, explores the relationship between music, text, and reception, specifically that of two baritone art-song performers. Though Barthes did not himself propose a formal semiology of music (according to Wikipedia, this occurred through Finnish musicologist Eero Terasti and other writers), "The Grain of the Voice" does offer much to discuss within the realm of music, sound, and sign. However, I believe Barthes expresses some viewpoints regarding the art of singing with which I would like to argue – the subjectivity of his opinions, as well as the singers he chooses to compare, provoke the "expert singer" to respond.

Barthes' first statement, invoking Émile Benveniste: "Language...is the only semiotic system capable of *interpreting* another semiotic system" (Barthes, p. 179, emphasis author's). He goes on to argue that in fact, language does very badly when it comes to interpreting music. I cannot move forward without ruminating on this – surely, language is not exclusive in its ability to interpret other semiotic systems. The obvious example at hand is *music*. Can music not interpret speech, text, marks on a page, human emotion? Indeed, musicians are nothing if not interpreters.

As it is my realm, allow me to focus upon Western Art Music (in itself an immense entity), neglecting here all others: jazz, “pop”, rock, metal, and innumerable global incarnations of musicking. As a working participant in WAM, my artistry concerns itself almost exclusively with the interpretation of another artist’s work. The colored squiggles of John Cage’s *Aria*, the time-honored works of revered art-song composers like Schubert and Fauré, an operatic aria by Mozart (itself an interpretation within an interpretation – in the case of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, my role is derived from a Beaumarchais play in five acts, rendered as a four act opera libretto by Da Ponte, set to music by Mozart, and sung by thousands of sopranos before me) – I can not claim authorship of any of these works, but I interpret them in front of an audience with my voice, my education, and my life’s experience. They are *my* performances.

Depending on the piece, I may have more clear ownership over interpretation – in the example of *Aria*, the pitches are entirely unspecified, and the non-vocal sounds made are at performer’s discretion. At the opposite, singing in an opera requires that I incorporate the interpretations of the director, conductor, score, costumers, lighting designer, and other singers into my performance.

The codes of Western art music are multiple – musicians are required to understand and respond to these codes every time they pick up and play a work. In turn, listeners respond to the aural representations of these codes. The examples are endless. At the very basic, there is a convention that a major triad sounds “happy” whereas a minor triad sounds “sad”. I will argue that nothing inherent in these collections of three pitches have any true tie to the human state of sadness or happiness – but those who are participants in WAM understand this convention. The composers of the Second Viennese School (Arnold Schoenberg, among others) tried to “emancipate” tones from such conventions, to limited success.

Other examples of codes in music: first, the “modes” mentioned by Barthes that ancient Greek musicians codified – different scale collections were assigned different *affects*. Moving forward to the Romantic era, *affects* were assigned to the various key signatures of the Western scale. Christian Schubart described these in *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806). The entry for Eb major: “The key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God” (from Rita Steblin’s translation in *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, 1983). This is a constructed link – I may argue the key of Eb major is not fundamentally different, except in Hertz, from D major, whose entry reads: “The key of triumph, of Hallejuahs, of war-cries” (Steblyn). It is constructed meaning. Some rare individuals, synaesthetes, “see” colors ascribed to certain keys, but a cursory search of their experiences reveals no clear pattern of key-to-color among this group.

Barthes mentions the Romantic and later traditions of giving “emotive predicates” to tempo markings – increasing the adjectives utilized *within the written music*. Instead of “andante”, itself a descriptor meaning “walking pace”, one may see a tempo of “andante cantabile”, meaning “walking pace in a singing manner”. The amount of certain composers pack into tempo markings can be great, and perhaps excessive. The practice has been the subject of several humorous jabs – Erik Satie added the marking “like a nightingale with a toothache” to one of his piano works, and a current music-aficionado image being passed around the Internet features the tempo marking “Moderato, play without bitching about the key”. The last example is likely in jest, but it illustrates the incredible specificity some modern composers in WAM employ in their writing. In these cases, musicians are using audible music to directly interpret language. However, one wonders how much these expressive-markings are perceived by listeners.

If music had no ability to interpret other semiotic systems (movement, text, images), there would be no reason to perform a piece more than once. This is the fundamental difference between performing and other arts – paintings, sculptures, drawings, essays – these are a direct communication between artist and audience. They demand no intermediary in order to be consumed, observed, absorbed. A joy of the performing arts is their ephemerality – no performance can ever be exactly duplicated (this, of course, ignores recorded performance – Benjamin’s article “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” discusses that case in better detail). My weak argument merely bats at the notion of exclusivity of “language” as an interpreter of semiotic systems. If one were to reduce music to a “type” of language, there would be no argument. This is not at all my intent. I am simply struggling against Barthes’ insinuation that, while language is able to interpret music, music cannot reciprocate.

Moving forward, Barthes observes that the whole of music criticism is based upon predicating – “Music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective” (p. 179). He illustrates this position by suggesting a “little parlour game: talk about a piece of music without using a single adjective” (p. 179). Barthes states that the adjective is the weakest linguistic category, and asks: “Are we condemned to the adjective? Are we reduced to the dilemma of either the predicable or the ineffable?” (p. 180). By asking, Barthes suggests that a finer scope and vocabulary for the discourse of music are possible. He says: “Rather than trying to change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself...to alter its level of perception and intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language” (pp. 180-181). To make his attempt to change the musical object, Barthes focuses on one segment of vocal music – art song (specifically French and German, using a native-speaking

singer of each as his subjects). He introduces the term “grain”, meaning “*the encounter between a language and a voice*” (Barthes p. 181, emphasis author’s).

Barthes clarifies later in the essay that what he defines as “grain” is not simply the timbral qualities of the voice, but the interplay of the music and the language through the individual voice. This is extremely valuable as a point of exploration in the singing arts. However, Barthes exhibits some biases that trouble the singer in me. “Opera is a genre in which the voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity, a voice with a grain which little signifies” (p. 181). My interpretation of this statement is that – as the opera singer is “putting on” a character, whatever grain he/she employs is somehow false – denying the basic individuality of one’s natural(?) true(?) voice. I counter – in *any* singing, the voice has “gone over...to dramatic expressivity” in some fashion. I may suggest that every time a person opens his/her mouth to phonate, there is some expressive intent, which cannot be denied or ignored in a discussion of this “grain”. I can state with certainty that singers of art song are still performing “characters”. Though my identification with the protagonist of Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und –leben* may be closer to my reality than, say, the role of La Contessa in *Le nozze di Figaro*, I did not write the poetry to either, and I would not express the contained ideas of those works in the way they were composed, were I to speak them myself (in my own, native English prose). The “grain” is always modified, compromised to suit the performance – always present, but never pure.

In his (albeit flawed) attempt to diminish the role of “dramatic expressivity” in his examples, Barthes chooses interpreters of art song to compare in his discussion. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a German baritone, recorded prolifically through the 1950s to 70s. He is generally considered a gold standard for Lieder-singing for his expressive and technical mastery. According to Barthes: “Fischer-Dieskau is assuredly an artist beyond reproach...his art is

inordinately expressive...it is the soul which accompanies the song, not the body” (p. 183).

Barthes compares his singing with that of Swiss (French-speaking) baritone Charles Panzéra, whose career was slightly earlier (1920s to 40s) than Fischer-Dieskau’s, therefore less well recorded. One must bear in mind that the technology for recording advanced dramatically over the course of the mid-to-late 20th century: the extant available recordings for Panzéra are very few, and rather rare. To illustrate: the BGSU music library carries 154 distinct audio recordings by F-D, and none by Panzéra – it is only due to a gracious Youtube contributor, and his/her video of a Gramophone recording, that I was able to listen to Panzéra in preparation for writing.

As Barthes elaborates on what he calls “the grain of the voice” comparing these singers, he employs an extension of Julia Kristeva’s terms *pheno-text* and *geno-text*, coining the terms *pheno-song* and *geno-song*. He defines *pheno-song* to mean “all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer’s idiolect, the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is...customary to talk about” (Barthes, p. 182). The *geno-song* is defined as “the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality’; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication...it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language...the *diction* of the language” (pp. 182-183, emphasis author’s).

Through examples comparing the vocal artistry of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzéra, a certain bias should be addressed: in speaking of the *diction* of the language, one may observe that Barthes, as a native French speaker, would likely be predisposed to discerning very fine points of French language more easily than German. Indeed, he speaks of the grain as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (p. 182) – in this way, it is no surprise that in

this essay, Barthes seems to strongly favor Panzéra as a singer with “grain”. According to Barthes, Fischer-Dieskau reigns supreme in the realm of the *pheno-song*. The conventional facets of singing – expression, breathing, lyricism – are F-D’s domain. Barthes follows this seeming praise with the observation that “With FD, I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose” (p. 183). He criticizes the “myth of respiration”, and the prevalence of singing teachers to teach breathing as the foundation for singing. Though breathing is not the *only* skill requiring mastery for good singing, it is certainly one of great importance – perhaps more so than Barthes would wish. He states: “The lung, a stupid organ, swells but gets no erection; it is in the throat, place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that *signifiance* explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*” (p. 183, emphasis author’s). If one’s pen is without ink, the thoughts that occur cannot be written down – perhaps a poor comparison, but if one cannot breathe in a manner suitable for singing, there will be no “phonic metal” to harden in the throat, and nothing to excite the “mask” to vibration. If a stupid organ, the lung is still necessary to the art.

Barthes muses: “All of Panzéra’s art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows (simple technical feature: you never heard him *breathe*...)” (p. 183, emphasis author’s). He continues to describe Panzéra’s attention to vowels over the articulation of consonants, and that the “‘truth’ of language” (p. 184) lay in the sound of a living language, rather than the clarity and expression aspired to by most singers/critics of singing. In this way, Barthes seems to hail Panzéra as a master of *geno-song* – it is not in the conventional “art” of singing where Panzéra excels, but in the way he interacts with the language of the song “having nothing to do with communication” (p. 182). Barthes praises Panzéra for his ability to “hold in check the attempts at *expressive reduction* operated by a whole culture against the poem and its melody” (p. 184). As a

performer, I struggle with this statement. Is Barthes suggesting that by expressing something through singing, or assigning an emotion, one detracts from the poetry? Referring to Fischer-Dieskau: “His art - expressive, dramatic, *sentimentally clear*, borne by a voice lacking in any ‘grain’, ...fits well with the demands of an *average* culture” (p. 185, emphasis author’s).

Although Fischer-Dieskau’s singing was so available, in demand, and highly acclaimed (or perhaps because of this), Barthes seems to reject his art in favor of Panzéra, of whom he says: “It is perhaps...because this art was *already* marginal, mandarin, that it was able to bear traces of *signifiante*, to escape the tyranny of meaning” (p. 185). [Liz’s note: it may take ages for me to understand what Barthes means here – it smacks of Adornian elitism. I may never get it.]

As Barthes continues to discuss the interaction of language and music, he mentions too briefly another very important topic of discussion – that is, the differences between French and German language poetry, and the culture surrounding each (which *cannot* easily be separated from a discussion of the interplay of music and language!) In addition, the closing arguments of “The Grain” offer many potential arguments with musicians – a sampling includes: “*Pelléas* is often sung badly – dramatically” (p. 186); a mention of the “pathetic orchestra (success of Mahler)” (p. 187); and the idea that “the various manners of playing are all flattened out *into perfection*: nothing is left but pheno-text” (p. 189).

“The Grain of the Voice” contains some extremely useful points – the perception of and interaction with the body in musical performance, music criticism past the adjectival, and the coining of terms to aid further discussion. However, as a performer, certain “personal taste” biases collide with my experience, and at times Barthes seems slightly blind to some of the factors one must take into account when comparing singers. In short, I believe each singer has a “grain”, but how a listener perceives it will necessarily vary.

Text sources

Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Steblin, Rita. *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983.

Online sources

Image: <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/play+without+bitching>

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Fischer-Dieskau

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Panzéra

Recordings: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq2c4kIdfR0>