

## **The Contemporary Performance Voice: An auditory operation**

A written reflection on  
Pieter Verstraete's *Vocal Extensions, Disembodied Voices in Contemporary  
Music Theatre and Performance* and  
Nicholas Till's *Investigating the entrails: Post-operatic music theatre in  
Europe*

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## Introduction

What strikes me in Pieter Verstraete's essay *Vocal Extensions, Disembodied Voices in Contemporary Music Theatre and Performance* is the extent to which Verstraete analyses philosophical concepts regarding listening theory when the essay's main title suggests it will discuss voice: "*Vocal Extensions*". Of course, this draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between voice and listening. As Trevor Wishart writes in his book *On Sonic Art*:

*In any system of communication at least two features are involved. We can discuss the sound emissions of one individual in terms of their being indicators, signals, symbols or signs, only in relation to how they are perceived by the listening creature* (Wishart 1996, 248).

One of the many items that stand out in contemporary music theatre is an emphasis on deconstructing the phenomena of voice and listening.

### **i) Radical vocality, the disembodied voice and the acoustic mirror**

The emergence on stage of what Verstraete terms 'radical vocality'<sup>1</sup> is defined and summarised by Verstraete to include vocal experimentations using extended vocal techniques such as throat and overtone singing, playing with harmonics and multiphonics, the vocal fry, but is mainly discussed in

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<sup>1</sup> Radical in terms of going against the grain of historical traditions and undoing aesthetic conventions and institutional hierarchies. Discussed further in relation to voice in paragraph iii) 'operating on the voice'.

his essay in the concept of the ‘disembodied’ voice, which is also termed the ‘virtual’, the ‘acousmatic’ or the ‘ventriloquist’ voice.

A peculiar effect happens when the disembodied voice is fed into the symbiotic voice/listening system: it renegotiates the listener’s regimes of perception drawing the listener toward himself. In this way, Verstraete suggests that experimental vocal performance that uses the disembodied voice can function as an ‘acoustic mirror’ that enables a ‘self-reflexivity’ both for the performer who with the use of live electronics can record and play himself back *and* for the listener who when experiencing the disembodied voice is deprived of a visually concrete sound-source and instead becomes ‘aware of his own listening act’, consequently more ‘aware’ of himself. Like this, the disembodied voice can to an extent shift the voice’s status as object in the performance and instead position the *listener* as the *object* of the performance experience (although it should be kept in mind that the performer is also a listener of himself). One might ask why the act of listening is getting so much attention in modern performance’s system of communication. What role does the ‘listening creature’/spectator play in contemporary music theatre? And more broadly, how is communication happening today in music theatre? In order to address these questions it is important to first define and contextualise the phenomenon of the disembodied/virtual/acousmatic/ventriloquist voice of radical vocality.

## ii) the acousmatic voice

The ‘acousmatic’ began as a term coined by poet Jérôme Peignot in describing electroacoustic music in 1955, based on the Greek ‘akousma’, which means ‘what is heard’ and refers to Pythagoras teaching his pupils orally from behind a curtain. Coincidentally, the notion of the acousmatic voice is supposed by Mladen Dolar to originate in the world of theatre, which defines itself by a separating curtain. Following Peignot, Pierre Schaeffer used the term acousmatic in 1966 to designate the ‘sonorous object’. In 1977 R. Murray Schafer – although with a slightly negative view on the effects of acousmatic listening on the individual’s healthy relationship with their environment – discusses the notion in terms of ‘a sound that we can hear without knowing its cause’ hidden by a curtain of technology. Moving on to film theory, Michel Chion used the term acousmatic to denote ‘sounds one hears without seeing their original cause’ and described the opposite process ‘de-acousmatisation’ as that which brings the sound-source back into the image frame in film.

All of the above definitions have one thing in common: a split and dividing of the senses of hearing and seeing. When this is used in performance – whose communication relies on applying these senses – the disembodied acousmatised voice provides endless possibilities for

imaginative play but also provides a space for interrogating the elements involved in the very act of communication. Upon observation, one can propose that the contemporary performance voice is performing empirical experiments on the audience's relationship to their modes of listening, be it oral, literate, causal, or a combination of all three. Indeed, by setting off a search in the performance for a source to a sound (a search whose process is initiated by a marked separation of the body's visual/sonic dichotomy) the disembodied voice activates a procedure for testing the senses.

### **iii) a laboratory for sensory experimentation on the body – operating on the voice**

This clinical leaning of contemporary experimental music theatre is also discussed in Nicholas Till's essay *Investigating the entrails*, particularly in relation to the voice. In a description of performances by Italian theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio Till notes the 'obvious' relationship between 'opera and pathology' (43). For instance, the performances *Voyage au bout de la nuit* in 1998 and *Giulio Cesare* aestheticise and emphasise the 'grotesque', the 'effluvia' and the 'carnal' (43) corporeality of the voice onstage. Another example offered by Till that dissects the corporeality of voice in performance is in Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino's drama *Lohengrin*, 1984, which features a female vocalist delivering 'gulps, teeth chattering, saliva, squelching, lip pops' (44). Indeed, many of Sciarrino's characters are 'confined within the space of pre-linguistic vocality', that is, confined to spaces of sound production without meaning. This suggests a regression to a pure state, a tabula rasa, if you will, in terms of the voice.<sup>2</sup>

During a description of the composer Giorgio Battistelli's performance *Experimentum Mundi*, 1981, Till mentions Opera's etymological roots: 'the word opera means nothing more than "work"' (44). Opera is derived from the Latin 'opus' and presents these synonyms: labour, effort and exertion. The traditional notions of 'concealing the labour of operatic production' (44), that is: the 'sustained melodic expression' and 'seamless flows of breath striven for in operatic singing' that fetishise 'virtuosity' (44) and celebrate the very familiar 'equation of voice and ideality' have in these performances been inverted to expose the "work" to the extent that the work in opera has become the performance, such as in *Experimentum Mundi*.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Till focuses his discussion on Italian and German contemporary music theatre. These two European countries underwent fascist and Nazi regimes and it is believed that Opera was involved in the formation of these regimes. Therefore, Till details how artists in these countries are re-working their history and cultural identity by engaging in an operating procedure of dissecting Opera, now termed 'post-operatic music theatre'.

Following, another inversion of the concept of work in contemporary experimental music performance can be seen in the traditionally differentiated trichotomy of composer, conductor, performer now being consolidated. More frequently, the performer is nowadays also the composer and - especially if he works with live electronics - is working/composing *live* as seen in the performances of Charlemagne Palestine and Alex Nowitz during the Who's Afraid of Modern Opera programme at the Operadagen Rotterdam Festival 2011.

A mission to dehierarchise, to undo institutional hierarchies, and to emphasise the split of the voice's 'distinct sounding and corporeal qualities from its signifying properties' (Verstraete) is evident and couples with the notion of dissecting. What is pushing these operations? Why is there an urge to dissect the body in contemporary experimental vocal performance (or *bodies* if one includes the listeners)? Is it symptomatic of our times, and if so, of what?

#### **iv) radical hearing – operating on the ears**

Upon closer inspection of the body and its senses it is revealed how fundamental the sense of hearing is to being alive: the ears, music therapist Silvia Nakkech notes, are the 'first sense organ to fully develop' (2012, 13) and that is as a foetus of twenty weeks of age.<sup>3</sup> Hearing is supposed to be the last of our senses to stop functioning before we die. Steven Connor explains that we are conditioned in the concept of 'causal listening', constantly trying to decode and to find the cause and source from where sounds emanate. Furthermore, Connor describes causal listening as the most fundamental mode of listening, serving as a survival strategy for the listener so that they are able to orient themselves in relation to the sound-source in order 'to regain control' (Verstraete) of a situation. In the absence of a visual (and by here I mean corporeal) sound-source such as in the context of the disembodied voice, the listener loses the power to address his situation. In an attempt to regain control over the uncontrollability of the disembodied voice, Connor suggests we invent a 'voice-body' or 'vocalic body' by means of our imaginary ear that is filled with vocalic excess. This we do, then, apparently in an effort to "survive" the situation. It is almost as if we will expire if we do not have an outlet for receiving a voice. Indeed, throughout Verstraete's essay the excess of voice – especially the multiplied acousmatic voice in audio technology – is described as plethoric: '*inundating* the senses with endless repetitions', with '*sensory excess*', '*overwhelming*' in its 'effect and *saturates* the ears in a gesture of *over-exposure*'. Coincidentally, the adjectives

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<sup>3</sup> Important to psychoanalytic theory, the first voice we hear is the *disembodied* mother's voice, which we are believed to go in search for, for the rest of our lives.

used to describe the receiving listening body: ‘transfixed’ and ‘immobile’ suggest a prey that has been trapped, caught, and struggles to “live”. The power of the voice is noted, but the extended voice in radical vocality, shaped, multiplied and enlarged by electronic means is even more powerful and uncontrollable, and therefore has a deeper impact on the listening subject or ‘object’, depending on how one sees the situation.

We have reached a time where we are truly able to interact in innovative ways in performance, not just affording novel experiences for the listener but also for the vocal performer who is both a sound-producer and a “listening creature”. We see (and hear) that radical vocality has a lot of potential and force. So what is the purpose behind this project of our times?

#### **v) the sound of radical vocality**

In *Vocal Extensions* Verstraete mentions how it is a straining of the vocal chords that produces the voice, and declares the voice to be ‘the most “forceful” communicative instrument’. The voice is a force – ‘savage’ in the case of Michelle Duncan. Inevitably, the reception of that forceful energy will execute a form of violence ‘straining the listener’s eardrums’. However, perhaps with that violence comes more truth, and with truth comes freedom.

Post-modernism’s project of freeing the ‘voice’s autonomy from language’ (Verstraete) removes the falseness of verbal language. Verbal language is useless in communicating meaning, or for the better words of Wishart: it is ‘inadequate’, ‘arbitrary’ and ‘redundant’.<sup>4</sup> Verbal language and the conscious mind are close friends; therefore, if one removes verbal language one experiences a loss of conscious control. Similar to the ecstatic behaviour experienced in ‘glossolalic speech’, the vocal performer of radical vocality is ‘able to articulate the voice or the body to a degree or extent and with that a fluency which is not possible where the conscious mind retains control over the intellectual-physiological sphere’ such as in verbal language (Wishart, 259). Revisiting the realm of pre-linguistic sounds, the voice expresses itself with freedom and the voice in the body is literally in motion, freeing itself in flows from systems of previously imposed control. The disembodied voice in electroacoustic performances might equally be said to be unchaining itself from tight grips of performance conventions. While

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<sup>4</sup> Wishart on verbal language: ‘the inadequacy of a discrete verbal vocabulary of “emotional states” as a means of describing what is going on within a being’ (255); ‘the arbitrary sign of language’ (256); ‘the redundancy involved in the system’ (257) of language; ‘the microstructural, gestural articulation remains more closely tied to our visceral/physiological response system than the detachment of the linguistic sign’ (257). Communication by kinesics and paralanguage conveys more than verbal language.

acknowledging that the use of technology in performance may be perceived as a step away from authenticity (and freedom) it might instead be interpreted as a step closer to the truth. For instance, the organic process in which performer Nowitz ‘feeds back’ his disembodied voice to its ‘originating body’ by use of live electronics and interface technology (in a digital musical instrument called the Wiimote), could perhaps unite the troubling duality in the Greek etymology of ‘phoné’: the human ‘voice’ at one with its ‘sound’ in technology. Indeed the operation involved in the act of reinstalling the body in the experience of the human voice – especially with the new forms of vocal extended techniques that exclude verbal language – is not just organic but ritualistic and glossolalic in nature.

Therefore, is radical vocality finding more authentic means of communicating, of expressing and of freeing the voice?

## Conclusion

### vi) retraining the ears of performers and the audientia

The contemporary experimental performance voice seems to suggest that both performers and audience should be listening more closely in the act of communication, retraining their ears. That the Everyman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the alienated modern listening subject with split perceptions, should re-evaluate his levels of attention. Verstraete mentions Roland Barthes who says ‘humanity needs to *recognise* itself in that space’ of today. The acoustic mirror in radical vocality is encouraging the performer and audience to recognise and confront their current reflections. Significant to the discussion is the etymological roots of ‘audience’: from Latin *audientia*, from *audire* to ‘hear’.

The voices in radical vocality bring to light the question of the true source origin of the voice. It seems problematic when Verstraete at the end of his essay adds that ‘voice never belongs to a body or to a space’. This notion is also pointed out by Steven Rafferty in a review of Mladen Dolar’s book *A Voice and Nothing More*: ‘the source of the voice can never truly be revealed, even when we watch the external surface of a body speak the voice we hear issues from somewhere within, somewhere beyond our view’ (2008, 827). The game will go on forever. Nowitz’s vocal art performances works with that enigma, bridging the sampled computationally reproduced voice and the natural live voice constantly, and very quickly, confusing the spectator/listener. Contemporary experimental vocal art enables a new way of seeing and hearing and therefore also a new way of communicating. As Wishart says in his book: ‘we may be brought to see the world from an entirely different perspective’ (262).

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## Works Cited

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