

## **Voice, Music and Theatrical Narrative** by Martin Julien

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### **Introduction**

Our team of theatrical researchers took it upon themselves to do some preliminary experimentation regarding the influence of live vocal musical sound on the uses and meaning of narrative within a theatrical context. Although our work must be considered unscientific, and necessarily limited in scope, we were able to successfully identify certain patterns and effects through our efforts which may provide a strong template for future exploration. What follows is a précis of our activities. As an addendum, I will provide a list of our primary resource materials.

We began our collective journey with a discussion of what might be called "the semiotics of music." Music has always presented unique challenges to its beleaguered semiologists; certainly music is both patterned and communicative, but its systematic meaning remains entirely elusive. What exactly, we asked ourselves, does music communicate? More specifically, what function can it fulfill with regards to narrative or character meaning in a theatrical (storytelling) setting? It is easy to concur with Adorno's famous paradoxical comment on Mahler that music is "a narrative that narrates nothing".

Moving into our work, though, we came to agreement on some generally observed principles.

Firstly, we averred that musical sounds are suffused with feeling, and that emotional responses are related to the interpretation of the experience of music. Secondly, we recognized that human beings are symbolic animals who seek to give interpretation and meaning to any semiotic traces; therefore, music may not be a narrative but an incitement to make a narrative, to comment, to analyze. Thirdly, we acknowledged that music retains both strong emotional and memory-based associative elements for both the singer/player and the hearer. Lastly, we questioned whether our well-developed Western tone system, of a twelve-partitioned octave consisting of only major and minor scales leads to a paucity of emotive and narrative choices with regard to expression.

### **Sharing Musical Stories.**

An initial exercise was to sing each other a song of our own choosing, and for everyone to then construct simple narratives, or strings of images, based on what they heard. Two of the pieces chosen had distinct religious or liturgical connections, and this over-coding seemed impossible to dismiss, even within our generally secular little group. A third piece was populist German (Weill), and this element too was inescapable in its referential implications. It also seemed to bring more focus to the singer – the subject,

or interpreter - and instantly created a theatrical frame, through which to intuit meaning. Needless to say, our narrative responses were as varied and personal as our own memories, associations and aesthetics; the confluence of major, and minor sounding passages had the usual result of identifying happy, or sad, imagery; and there was certainly some evidence of what we might call tone-painting, when runs up the scale elicited feelings of rising and runs down of falling, etc. In the end, we affirmed our suppositions that music could not be strictly programmatic in its narrative intent or interpretation. Music appeared to embody a distinct call to memory (both personal and collective), regardless of its specific historical associations. We all sought to generate meaning by subjectively interpreting the songs.

### **Modes and Moods.**

We then proceeded to experiment with medieval modes. Through the simple singing of scales, we discovered that the various modes did indeed offer a much wider palate in terms of emotional response. Whereas all minor scales struck us as similarly sad, and dark, and the major keys offered only slight variations in response (the plainness of C, the brightness of G), the modal scales demonstrated much more personality to our ears and voices. (Our favourite was the dark, seductive and sensuous Locrian mode.)

### **Strict Spatial.**

Here we did some basic exploration with the concept of musical intervals as they relate to the spatial dialectic between two singers. Dividing the length of our black box, theatre space into twenty-four equal increments (representing two chromatic scales of twelve), we proceeded to have our two singers work in interval patterns of fourths, fifths and octaves, both vocally and spatially. I speculated that the singers would have more difficulty singing intervals while physically describing counter-intuitive spatial positions (i.e. moving to a third, position while singing a fourth interval), but this did not turn out to be particularly true. We did find that it was much more comfortable for the singer to hold a fourth, against an eighth, rather than a third, against the eighth, but overall it was the relationship between the singers as co-performers that was the pre-eminent factor in spatial movement, rather than the strict arrangements of measured intervals. There was some evidence that blindfolded singers were able to recreate the musical interval spatially with fair accuracy (i.e. singing a fifth, while moving to the fifth position on our divided stage), but this had a lot to do with utilizing the clues of room tone and remembered positioning. A few principles we discovered:

- ascending intervals tended to move singers apart; descending, to move them together;
- a singer would tend to move in relation to their partner's changing intervals, even if they remained on the tonic;
- narrative was quickly imposed by singer and listener upon the changing spatial relationships, by the simple fact of bodies moving toward, or apart from, each other in

either consonant or dissonant reflection of the musical intervals ("oh, he wants to be near her/oh, she's trying to get away from him", etc).

### **Same Music, Different Text.**

Here we presented the listener with three very different texts, spoken dramatically on stage, but accompanied by the very same simple music in the form of vocal duets (plainchant, strict counterpoint) performed off-stage in the background. The most interesting observation here was that in instances where the text's mood and subject seemed analogous to the music's intent, the listener suspended their logical and schematic mind in favour of their intuitive one. When it was easy for the listener to step into the thinking of "oh, this music supports the text I'm hearing – I'll just listen to the story", then that was the choice made. If, however, the two elements seemed disjunctive, then the analytical mind kicked in, trying to make sense of the reasons why this text and music were linked dramatically. There was an immediate search for a cohesive principle. As well, our rather sombre music tended to raise the status of the stories which were most prosaic, contemporary and scatological. The role of the invisible singers as narrative elements in this theatrical format was not raised observationally.

### **Behind, To the Side, Up Close.**

These two experiments each had two components. In the first, a piece of fairly dense text was read by an invisible speaker behind the listener while a singer sitting before the listener hummed a wordless, whimsical tune. Then the spatial relationship was reversed, with the speaker on stage and the singer behind. A truly fascinating experiment – we found that whatever was in front of the listener held most of the narrative weight. The text was extremely difficult to decipher and attend to when placed behind, and the wordless singer on display became the story. Conversely, it was easy to hear the story with the speaker in front of us, and the humming became gentle background music – evocative, but unobtrusive. Also, it was recognized that the listeners inevitably attempted to correlate the visible singer's presence as a character in a plot which somehow revolved around the opaque storytelling behind them. On another level, the text behind the listener sometimes seemed to play the role of music in a more traditional context. Whatever is in front is narrative; whatever is behind is support.

In the second, a storyteller was placed in an intimate spatial relationship with the listener, almost knee to knee, whilst a singer was placed extreme stage left in a crouched position. The story told to the listener was childlike and transparent, and the wordless humming of the singer seemed supportive and unobtrusive. The presentation was then repeated, but this time the singer placed strange accents and mildly aggressive dynamics on the same tune; the text was delivered in a near-identical fashion. Whereas the listener could clearly hear and enjoy the story the first time, in the second round it became increasingly difficult to concentrate with the subtly strident singing emanating

from farther away. It was observed that the singer's presence became somewhat malevolent, and that a dark narrative was easily ascribed to the hummer's intentions. Through subtle shifts of musical dynamics, the intimacy of the storytelling was noticeably undermined.

### **And for your Entertainment...**

Our research team was lucky enough to invite a half-dozen volunteer listener/spectators, into the theatre during our penultimate session for a twenty minute presentation. For this event, we strung together a sort of dramatic pastiche of many of the ideas we had previously explored – though we discarded some devices and brought in new elements, as well. It is important to note that we consciously strove to employ only the smallest traces of narrative meaning and movement in our presentation – many of the texts, music and choreography utilized were virtually arbitrary with regard to their placement and execution (at least from a narrative point of view). Unsurprisingly, all of our audience participants worked to give narrative weight to the smallest of semiotic signs. The absence of a voice in counterpoint; the absence of a body in a doorway; the satisfying consonance of two people singing together; the confusion of repeated text in different context; the mystery of half-heard melodies joined with prosaic dialogue; the challenge of unifying different actor and musical elements around the entire theatre – all these disparate actions became quick fodder for the invention and evocation of story and feeling for our audience. Some observations about this session:

- the opening setting of music, text and audience/performer dialectic tended to set the frame through which meaning would be generated by the audience, whether that frame related thematically to the subsequent material or not;

- there were consistent attempts made by viewers to search for thematic unity in the pieces and their presentation;

- it's much easier to accept and absorb the confluence of text, music and presentational style if there appeared a unity of approach (e.g. German song combined with an aggressive harangue created a confluence of Third Reich, imagery in many people's minds, though there was no direct contextual relationship between these elements);

- where the music and text seemed disjunctive, much effort was spent by the audience in working to establish what that juxtaposition meant (e.g. a scene about suburban hockey parents accompanied by an invisible singer warbling through a half-heard Roman Catholic liturgical piece proved particularly disturbing and ambiguous in its implications);

- there was a real desire by most viewers for the two main singers, who were often featured in isolation and gazing at the absence of the other, to come together in both space and musical harmony; the fulfillment of this at the end was very satisfying for most viewers.

### **Some General Conclusions.**

- music always invites an incitement to make narrative (in music, there appears to be no real neutral -- we jump into narrative faster than with visual art, for instance; perhaps the linear nature of music compels us to create story );
- the constant cross-referencing of both visual and oral stimuli in a theatrical context deeply affects the generation of meaning for the spectator, even with only trace elements of narrative available;
- perceived stylistic and historical unity between text, music and delivery tends to lead to a meaning based on shared cultural assumptions;
- when the narrative impulse and the musical impulse seem unified, then we achieve a feeling and perception of consonance; WE WILL CREATE CONSONANCE IF WE CAN;
- relational imperatives of singing bodies in motion with each other are not guided by the geometry of the music, but by character and narrative impulses;
- though we seek as viewer/listeners to generate continuous theatrical meaning through the opening frame, of sounds and images presented to us, the organizing principle regarding meaning and story may come later in our experience as sounds and images pile up and resonate;
- the impulse towards what is text or narrative is rooted in what we see before us, not what we hear in the background; depending on the stylistic unity, background sound either supports or destabilizes the meaning generated onstage.

### **Some Future Considerations.**

Based on this preliminary work, I would suggest three areas which might prove fruitful for future researchers, or indeed, theatre practitioners in a production situation:

- Working with the notion of correlative and disjunctive styles. How are scenes or narrative affected when paired with music which shares stylistic traits, compared to being paired with music which is noticeably different, challenging or unsettling? (This is really working with music's noted associative qualities).
- How does the repetition of a piece of music within a narrative affect the reception of that narrative? This also works with the idea of association, but one that is formally built into the particular traffic of one staged work. If we hear a character sing a piece of music in an initial context, how does that change the way we generate meaning when the song is repeated in a later, very different context?
- The idea of darkness, or sightlessness, when combined with singing, moving bodies on stage. How do we, as an audience, invest in kinetic and relational meaning between characters when we can no longer see them? How does singing affect the theatrical

imagination of the darkened audience – what happens when aural clues become the pre-eminent tools from which to craft meaning?

– Lastly, it might be interesting to see some work that looks even more specifically at live singing in contrast to both instrumental and recorded music. According to some theorists, voice exists precisely at the threshold between self and world, centre and periphery: this seems an idea rich with theatrical possibility. A singing voice radiating outward to others invites, insistently, that they attend to and participate in it and the life it represents.

## Sources

### Music

*Panis Angelicus* – Thomas Aquinas/Cesar Franck

*Nana's Lied* – Brecht/Weill

*(Antiphon No. 44)* – Hildegard von Bingen

*Of the Father's Love Begotten and Aurelius Prudentius In Evangelium Magnificat* – John Taverner

*Sleeper's Wake (Mein Freund ist Mein)* – J.S. Bach

*Tina's Song* – Don Horsburgh

### Texts

*Junky* – William S. Burroughs

*The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* – Naguib Mahfouz

*The Red Balloon* – Albert Lamorisse

*Pilgermann* – Russell Hoban

*Hockey Mom, Hockey Dad* – Michael Melski

*The Toad and his Spots* – Latin/American Folktale

*The Owl and the Pussycat* – E. Lear/S. Owens

*Oprah Magazine* – “This Is What I Know” – Sept. '03

*Ages* – Al Purdy

### Modes

Lydian, Dorian, Phrygian, Mixolydian, Locrian, Ionian

### Bibliography

*Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, Jean-Jaques Nattiez, Princeton University Press, 1990

*The Interpretation of Music*, Michael Krausz, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1993

*Philosophical Perspectives on Music*, Wayne D. Bowman, Oxford University Press, 1998

*Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*, Ferruccio Busoni, 1907

*The Republic*, Plato, 360 BCE