

New Music, New Vocalities

I have spent much of the past year working intensively with a group of six singers who have been the inaugural cohort of VOICEBOX, my new programme for contemporary vocal performance. Between regular sessions with them and one-off masterclasses with other young singers, I have been thinking about how we choose the sort of sound we want to make when we sing. To be a singer of new music/contemporary-classical music/experimental music (the struggle with the terminology reflects the slippery permeability of the discipline) requires an extraordinarily flexible vocality. I am coming to the conclusion, however, that it may be more helpful to think in terms of multiple vocalities...

'Vocality' simply means 'of the voice': it therefore encompasses every sound we might make with our voice, from whispering to grunting, speaking, shrieking or singing. This breadth makes it a particularly helpful concept when thinking about contemporary classical music, which is famous for its extended vocal techniques. By contrast, 'song' is a narrower concept. Regardless of what sort of song pops into your head, each genre or tradition of song is associated with quite a specific vocality: think of crooning, for example, or death metal growling or RnB's virtuosic runs. This specificity was true of classical music too, until a certain point in what we call 'new music'.

Where does 'new music' begin? What defines it? New music as a genre is music that is engaged with, or experiments with, the process of renewing, reinventing or extending the tradition of Western classical music, and for the purposes of this essay I am taking 1958 as a watershed moment in the development of a new-music repertoire for the voice. What happened in 1958? John Cage wrote *Aria*, for Cathy Berberian:

The image shows two pages from a manuscript. The left page contains performance instructions for Cathy Berberian's 'Aria' by John Cage, dated 1958. The text is dense and includes details about time-length, notation, vocal lines, and the use of black squares for non-vocal sounds. The right page is the first page of the score, featuring a large, stylized blue line representing a vocal line, with various musical notations and labels such as 'DIROUHI', 'DI QUESTA TERRA', 'NABRASNO', 'A-RISE!', 'HAMPART-ZOOM', and 'CONSCIENCE ET'. The score is set against a light background with a grid.

Performance instructions and first page of John Cage *Aria*

This piece encapsulates the conscious desire within classical music that was accelerating around the middle of the twentieth century to escape — or to liberate — the classical voice. *Bel canto* had become the voice of classical music, most associated with opera, but alongside radical experiments with form, harmony and the very meaning of music came experiments with ways of singing, or even not-singing.¹

¹ It is important to remember that specific singers were very much at the heart of this revolution. The composers tend to get the credit but the breaking of new ground could not have happened without Cathy Berberian, Joan La Barbara, Jane Manning, Klaus Nomi, Thomas Buckner, Nicholas Isherwood et al.

So it is that what had been a musical tradition dominated by one way of singing — one vocality — has become, today, a musical tradition that is gloriously pluralistic. The centre did not hold, and the explosion of compositional aesthetics has gone hand in hand with an explosion of vocalities. The very reasons for organising sound in space have been blown wide open. We have left the dusty system of the *fach* lying in the rubble and there truly is space now for voices of all shapes and sizes. Where the classical voice had above all been a carrier of melody, which was itself a carrier of text, it is now so much more. The singer's trump card is a willingness to experiment: it is still legitimate to specialise in any given corner of the repertoire, but why miss out on the adventure, the extra gigs, the fun?!

A new-music singer, therefore, is a specialist and a chameleon. They are rooted in tradition and also the many new paths that emerge from that living tradition. They must be an advocate of brave new worlds. Having a 'lovely' voice is not enough in new music: one must be able to access multiple vocalities. (Notice that I don't say 'one needs to have more than one voice' — no, it is one voice, within one body, but it needs to be very flexible in colour, weight and style.) Further, one must become adept at asking 'what sort of vocality does this musical material require?' And this is key: in the magical, mysterious dance between score and sound we discover that material and vocality are inseparable. The material informs the choice of vocality; the vocality shapes the material.

I feel a little disappointed that it has taken me twenty years to have these thoughts but perhaps it is because traditional pedagogy doesn't actually make the obvious very clear? As far as I am aware there has not yet been any formalised guidance on this correlation between material and vocality. We have been so busy cataloguing extended vocal techniques (and then perhaps pushing back on that term in favour of an integrated flexibility) and so distracted by the proliferation of compositional 'schools' (New Complexity, Wandelweiser, New Discipline etc.) that we forget to be fully creative and intentional about the sounds we make. To think about sound rather than about music offers us a much more neutral starting point from which to enquire about the concepts, references, traditions and experiments behind the material with which we engage. Sound is our material; this is the substance that we generate with our voices and that we sculpt with our souls over many hours at home or in the rehearsal studio.

What I offer here is not a survey of recent music history; nor is it an analysis of compositional trends — vocality is the starting point and the aim is to provide a way into thinking about different types of vocal material. Many singers have no idea of the breadth of what awaits them, or how to navigate it. What follows is a sequence of eight 'new' vocalities, and for each I offer some hallmarks for easy identification, some thoughts on notation, and two examples of pieces that illustrate what I'm getting at. I acknowledge that most of the examples are for soprano (and several were written for me) but in many cases there are equivalent examples for other voice types so lower voices should not be discouraged. At the end I provide a playlist to facilitate exploration of my examples.

There is no need to think of these vocalities as tidy, discrete categories: obviously composers may explore different vocalities in different works, and even different vocalities within a single work, but again I stress that categorising composers is not the aim of this guide — it is to celebrate the endless possibilities within the voice!

1. The extended voice

Hallmarks: extensive use of what we call 'extended vocal techniques'², by which I suppose we mean 'non-classical' (though thoroughly time-honoured) vocalisations, such as speaking, whistling, screaming etc. as well as quite specialist techniques from other musical traditions, such as overtone singing, fry, microtonal ululations etc. We sense a very clear desire to move beyond the lyrical, the 'beautiful', in favour of a wider expressive palette. Requires a very embodied technique but can suit voices of all sizes.

Notation: if a score has an extensive set of performance notes at the front (or a *Legende* in German) explaining various notational symbols, it probably belongs in this vocality! N.B. There is still no uniform strategy for notating most extended vocal techniques...

Examples: Luciano Berio *Sequenza III* (1965) for Cathy Berberian
Rebecca Saunders *Skin* (2016) for me

2. The nonsense voice

Hallmarks: the syllable as agent of play and of mischief. Aperghis directly cites the influence of Lettrism, a movement associated with the French avant-garde which itself draws on Dadaism and Surrealism — we are in the land of nonsense, of malapropisms, of language as a slippery thing and of a strange form of poetry emerging from the slippage. Requires a vocal flexibility and precision that may not be evident on the page...

Notation: often more concerned with rhythm than with specific pitches. Expect motivic repetition and expansion, and an intense energy concerned with the effort to communicate despite the futility posed by carefully controlled barriers or obstacles.

Examples: Georges Aperghis *Récitations* (1977-78) for Martine Viard
Christopher Fox *Catalogue irraisonné* (1999-2001) for Barbara Hannigan

3. The instrumental voice

Hallmarks: the voice as any other instrument, which is to say a maker of pitched sounds. Rejects the operatic, *bel canto* hierarchy of voice 'accompanied' by instruments in favour of a tapestry of equal, interlocking lines. We often notice an absence of text (thus flattening the difference between the voice and an instrument) or the use of phonemes as purely sonic material. Often suits (or requires) a lighter, 'straighter' voice.

Notation: nothing very complex or surprising here. Perhaps an absence of text, meaning the singer is free to choose a neutral, comfortable vowel. (I avoid 'ah' which feels quite 'singerly'; 'aw' or 'er' (the schwa vowel in IPA) can work well.)

Examples: Morton Feldman *Three Voices* (1982) for Joan La Barbara
John McGuire *A Cappella* (1990-1997) for Beth Griffith

² I use scare quotes because I loathe the term. Extended beyond what, when these are sounds that we have made forever? Beyond a very narrow, nineteenth-century, Western definition of 'beauty' or 'art', I suppose... The term is associated with an aesthetic, though, which is why I repurpose it for the name of this vocality.

4. The psychoacoustic voice

Hallmarks: here the voice is mediating sound in space. Psychoacoustics is concerned with the physicality of sound and how we, as listeners, perceive it in our bodies and in our minds. In these auditory investigations, expect microtonal tuning and intentional beatings (when the air vibrates because of small differences between two pitches). As a performer this is a vocality that requires extreme precision and focus, but that can become almost transcendental.

Notation: there are various systems for dealing with the microtonal tuning (whether by inflections, quartertones or deviations in cents) that causes beatings. Expect long notes, because it takes time to establish and then experience the desired effect. My examples employ very different notational strategies (giving more or less freedom to the performer).

Examples: Alvin Lucier *Wave Songs* (1998) for Joan La Barbara
Pascale Criton *Alter* (2022) for me

5. The polystylistic voice

Hallmarks: mimicry and flexibility is the name of the game, shape-shifting deftly between many different vocal styles (eg. pop, jazz, 'folky' etc.). The idea is to dazzle with different colours whilst referencing very clearly the various associated aesthetics or affects. This is arguably the purest legacy of *Aria*. It suits a flamboyant performance style, a keen ear for imitation and a very flexible voice.

Notation: the stylistic shifts are often communicated in descriptive words (e.g. 'like Bob Dylan' or 'folky') rather than complex notation, requiring the performer to do their research and then find the required sound and physicality themselves.

Examples: Bernhard Lang *The Cold Trip* (2016) for Sarah Maria Sun and for me
Matthew Shlomowitz *Electric Dreams* (2017)

6. The intimate voice

Hallmarks: quiet, gentle, 'everyday' vocalisations that transcend tradition. This material often calls for an 'untrained' sound, creating intimacy through low volume, a recognisable universality and a lack of artifice. There is something private and half-formed unfolding: snippets of a half-formed melody and perhaps an expressive inhalation. N.B. The quiet often then poses a question around amplification...

Notation: there may seem to be a dissonance between the very precise notation used by the composer to communicate the specific vocalisations and the effect of simplicity required of the singer in performance. This vocality has some overlap with the instrumental voice (such as in Wandelweiser works) or the somatic voice.

Examples: Frank Denyer *Mother, Child and Violin* (2005)
Chaya Czernowin *Adiantum Capillus-Veneris I* (2016)

7. The somatic voice

Hallmarks: Somatics is a field within bodywork and movement studies which emphasizes internal physical perception and experience. Works in this category therefore focus on the embodied performing experience, often prioritising the process over the sonic outcome. The audience is invited into this vulnerable intimacy which sometimes almost borders on voyeurism. Suits a steady nerve and a willingness to abandon all training and expose something quite raw.

Notation: many works in this category are not notated but, rather, make use of what Luke Nickel terms 'living scores', residing in the bodies and memories of specific performers. In pursuit of a very embodied approach, any notation may leave a lot open, encouraging the performer to listen and to feel.

Examples: Cassandra Miller *Tracery : Lazy, Rocking* (2017) for me
Catherine Lamb *the being / the world* (2024) for me

8. The extra-human voice

Hallmarks: expect a vocality that is heavily mediated by technology (either live or in post-production). The voice may become transformed (e.g. autotune) or disembodied (e.g. AI-generated), requiring the singer to find a sound that maximises the effects. Often influenced by up-to-the-moment technologies explored in popular music. The use of technology may raise questions around the agency of the performer: who is manipulating what, and what are the implications on authorship and rights (especially regarding AI)?

Notation: varies wildly according to the technology/aesthetic employed. May not be notated at all if material is generated by AI; may be notated quite simply and then transformed in post-production. It depends on process and concept.

Examples: Jennifer Walshe *A Late Anthology of Early Music Vol. 1* (2020)
Annesley Black *tolerance stacks II* (2021) for Musikfabrik and me

Concluding observations

- The explosion of vocalities is a good thing! It means freedom; it means fun.
- The classical voice is still very much part of the story.
- A voice is always a body, and not all bodies can access all vocalities.
- Techniques are learned processes aiming at a consistent means of achieving a particular result. It takes a lifetime to learn some techniques.
- Text is still (and will always be) a signifier.
- The material informs the vocality; the vocality shapes the material.

The voice is not new. The fundamental vocality — the grunts, shrieks, whispers and hums of human communication — has not changed in 200,000 years. There is nothing fundamentally new to discover here. It is the framing of the sounds that evolves, and how we understand them. That, to me, is exciting.

Juliet Fraser, 25 October 2024

PLAYLIST

[Luciano Berio *Sequenza III* \(1965\)](#)
[Rebecca Saunders *Skin* \(2016\)](#)
[Georges Aperghis *Récitations* \(1977-78\)](#)
[Christopher Fox *Catalogue irraisoné* \(1999-2001\)](#)
[Morton Feldman *Three Voices* \(1982\)](#)
[John McGuire *A Cappella* \(1990-1997\)](#)
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[Cassandra Miller *Tracery : Lazy, Rocking* \(2017\)](#)
[Catherine Lamb *the being / the world* \(2023-2024\)](#)
[Jennifer Walshe *A Late Anthology of Early Music Vol. 1* \(2020\)](#)
[Annesley *Black tolerance stacks II* \(2021\)](#)

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