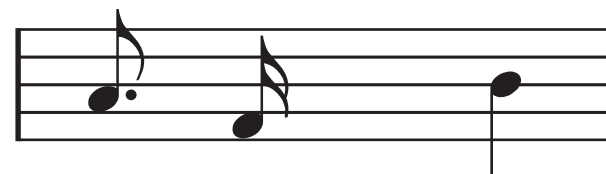




UNA VOCE



POCO FA

Una Voce Poco Fa,
The Language Of Singing
Bachelor Thesis by Francesca Burattelli
VAV Department
Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2015

Graphic Design by Till-M.Hormann
Printed at Gerrit Rietveld Academie

Table of Contents

A voice like sand and glue	3
Your lips move, but I can't hear what you're saying	7
Sinking in the quicksand of my thoughts	11
From your lips she drew	19
She's a lady whoa whoa whoa	25
Because we're living in a material world	29
Talk body, body to me	33
Are you passionate?	39
Bibliography	43

**A-voice-like-
sand-and-glue**
[e vɔjs lajk sænd
ænd glu]

When I was just a little girl¹ my father would read aloud from my pink book of fairy-tales. Actually he only did it once. And the reason why I remember it so clearly, is that I didn't understand a word of what he said. My father is not a bad speaker, neither a bad reader. But he had, in my young ears, an extremely rough voice. The roughness of his voice and the monotony of his reading metamorphosed into a compact mass of incomprehensible sounds. I was incapable of extracting the single words from it, and put them into a logical sequence. The few words I did get out of this chanting, dissolved into a fog of confusion, and the scattered meaning, made the whole even more absurd.

The sensitivity of a child's ears towards sound², is comparable with its sensibility towards taste and smell. In the same way that a strong taste can be unbearable for children, a particular sound can be overwhelming. Supposedly, the peculiarity or roughness of my father's voice, became an obstruction for my comprehension of his words, the understanding of what he was saying. There might be different reasons for this reaction; sensibility, aesthetic choice and experience. The complexity of the rough sound might have affected my experience of it, causing an aesthetic selection or differentiation of it. Hearing this "unclearness" or dissonance of the voice, my brain might have classified it as an unpleasant sound³.

It is generally believed that children at a certain age restrict their field of perception, to the "well-known-things", in order to prevent

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdhAfMor9BM>
2. Aging, our hearing decreases, caused to gradual damage of the hair-cells in the inner ear (cochlea). In this sense the ears of children are more "fresh" and unaffected. (<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/Pages/Age-Related-Hearing-Loss.aspx>)
3. Soundwaves travel through the ear, and their vibration makes some small bones move- this movement makes the liquid around the hair-cells move. The hair-cells sends then electrical impulses to the cells that signals the sound to the brain. When the electrical impulses are regular, the sound is received as pleasant when it is irregular, it is perceived as unpleasant. Furthermore, neurons get agitated by the irregular noise- some neurons have the task to analyse these sounds and find a pattern. Each time a pattern is found, the brain learns it, and will recognize it next time as not necessarily disturbing. If they fail to find a pattern, a chemical reaction releases Dopamine- too much Dopamine can create reactions similar to schizophrenia. (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91512-musical-language/>)

their own confusion.⁴ This might be an element in the development of our aesthetic sense, starting in childhood by a natural selection, and later eventually broadened by the given environment (including the education of parents, teachers ecc.) It might also have been, in my case, the unusual fact of hearing a male voice reading, since all my earlier experiences with the reading voice, were based on female teachers, and the voice of my mother.

This clear memory of words turning into ungraspable sounds, opened for me a series of thoughts around the voice; its composition, its use, and the way it is received. This led to a main concern- what happens to language, when it turns into singing? And in this anecdote it is clear, that there is a focal point in the very essence of the voice- even before it turns into clear singing. If I would have chosen the memory of my mother singing to me as a child, many other factors would have had a significant role, such as the nostalgia and sentimentality linked to the maternal voice. The function of the mother singing to her child, is the one of consoling and establishing a bond of comfort and love. The function of my father reading tended instead towards an educational purpose, trying to creatively and intellectually stimulating me. The focal point is therefore between the logical element of words, twisted and altered by the aesthetic and emotional one of sound and musicality.

In this paper, I will try to deal with these thoughts, by analysing different phenomena involving the singing voice, from the religious use of divine singing, to the musical interjections of Elvis. Reflecting on the voice's plausible fetishism, and connotations to

4. A similar selection is explained by food neophobia. The theory is that there has been an evolutionary advantage in taking precautions in trying new tastes, due to the risks of intoxication. Around the age when children are able to walk and therefore select their own food, this phenomena occurs. It is therefore believed that children are born with this instinct, and can seem to be picky in their development of taste during their growth. It might be same principle that counts for other selections and choices in the child's brain. (Alley, T.R.; K.A. Potter (2011). "Food Neophobia and Sensation Seeking". Handbook of Behavior, Food and Nutrition. Springer. pp. 707-724.)

the figure of myth, its feminine attributes and neurological patterns. These investigations are driven by a main concern- the conservatism and limits of language in music. I want to argue for the way that language (with)in music still is very bound to the expectation of a narrative and illustrative text, coherently in synergy with the music- language and music aiming to correspond with each other- and how this actually can be a limit for the use of language. I would dare to say, that where poetry has developed away from the classical notion of text being a logical illustration of thoughts, the language in music (song-lyrics) is stuck within a pedagogical mode of delivery, not daring to deal with the possibilities of language nor to give the listener another kind of freedom of listening. I want to propose another awareness around (the possibilities of) language, not only in the reception of listening, but also in the way it is actually being used in music.

**Your-lips-move-
but-I-can't-hear-
what-you're-saying**

[jɔr lips muv bət əj

kænt hɪr wət jɔr seɪŋ]

How to maintain the values of text, when it materializes through the voice- not just the speaking voice, but the singing voice?

As Mladen Dolar gives several examples of in her book⁵, there seems to be a history of linguistics dealing with the problematics of the singing voice- how the musical element of singing interferes with the textual, semantic “*The fact that singing blurs the word and makes it difficult to understand (...) has served as the basis for a philosophical distrust for this flourishing of the voice at the expense of the text*”⁶ What Dolar describes as the consequence of this belief, is a tendency to “*banish fascination with the voice*” since the voice in its pure element exceeds the semantic, and therefore “*turn the tables on the signified; it reverses the hierarchy*”. The voice in singing weakens the authority of the word, embedding it in aesthetics and blurring its logos.

So, starting from the presupposition that all language is altered when materialized through the singing voice, we have two sets of problematics: First the limitations of the delivery of the textual “message” (the implication of melody), second the invocation of response to the aesthetics around the voice (the aesthetics linked to the physicality and singing-style of the performer).

In other words: on one hand the melodic vocal alteration, causing a poorer understanding of the text (when for example compared to the speaking voice or the reading of a text), on the other hand the interpretation of the performer. But, of course, to make these presuppositions, one has to take into account the element of temporality. Temporality meant as the time in which the (action of) singing is perceived by the listener, and which constitutes the impression of the listener. So the point is not only how the melodic alteration of the words, in the singing, affects how the listener perceives them, but also the limited time in which the brain has to assimilate both the musical perception and the textual (and thereby make an “intellectual” and logical reading of the words.) The ra-

5. Dolar, Mladen *A Voice and Nothing More*, Short Circuit, MIT Press 2006.

6. Dolar, pp.30 Dolar, Mladen *A Voice and Nothing More*, Short Circuit, MIT Press 2006.

tionalization of the words we hear being sung is therefore not only different from the rationalization of the words being read, but also of those spoken.

It can therefore be a major frustration, regarding the performative act of singing itself, that the text always will be in the shadow of the music, as if the auditive and musical immediacy of perception in the brain, always will be prior to the understanding, the de-codification of the text. First comes the music=the voice, and then the text. As if our brain is incapable of reacting simultaneously on both levels.

By this I do not want to neglect the value of words and pose that they are not being as effectively and quickly rationalized, and probably this is exactly the power of singing; that words are understood on another level than just the intellectual one. (I will come back to this) But the problem might be, that the distance between intellectual and sensual perception, is somehow cut short by the conventional expectation of the singing: as if these two poles (intellect vs. sensuality) in which the singing balances, in the trial of differing from the first, too quickly moves to the other, the sensual one- which entails the danger of it becoming a fetish object⁷. I will come back to this.

So how can the singing remain in a twilight zone of sense and sensibility?

7. The fetish object mentioned here is related to the term "Commodity Fetishism" of Carl Marx, appearing in *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* from 1867. Marx explains how, in a capitalistic society, objects obtain a social attribute in themselves, regardless from their actual production value. By this, commodities as objects, are worshipped as having an own value, in the same way that religious fetish-objects are believed to have super-natural powers- "In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities"

**Sinking-in-the-
quicksand-
of-my-thoughts**

[sɪŋkɪŋ ɪn ðə kwɪksænd
əv maɪ θɒts]

It might be a sensual utopia striving to achieve and/or train the ear to assimilate the text in the singing, as quickly, deeply and nuanced as possible. It might instead be a question of temporality (as mentioned before), realizing that the text's effect on us is indeed as strong and immediate, but the "logical" digestion of it is scattered through the whole temporal spectrum of our life.

While the music automatically takes a great part of the sensorial activity, the text might seem secondary for the listener's awareness, but this might as well be due to a split perception, where the text is consumed unconsciously and thereby mentally "stored", and can (re-)appear at "random" times, triggered by other circumstances. The question is not how little we perceive the textual message, but in what way- while the concentration is intensified around the text in reading a poem, it is split in the act of listening to a song- but exactly this twoleveled situation reveals other possibilities of experience of music and text. One could even propose 3 points of concentration: 1-music, 2-text, 3-image/body/ performative style (since personal "style/expression" of the performer also shines through in a recording.)

Anyhow, a bilateral association-system. On the one hand the situation in which we hear a word, and a song pop's up in our head, or we hear a song and remember a certain situation where a particular word is mentioned, or a certain chain of thoughts occurs to us, as being linked to that particular word, assimilated at another time, through the song.

Neurologist Oliver Sacks, describes in his book *Musicophilia* different cases concerning music and the brain. One of the main discussions is, whether or not we perceive music separately on an emotional level or on an intellectual level. In some experiments on the drug Mescaline, the doctor Antony Storr noted how his experience, listening to music happened to be almost purely emotional⁸. He describes how he, listening to a piece of Mozart, had an exaggerated emotional response, while he was incapable of perceiving

8. Oliver Sacks *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, Knopf 2007 pp.328

the form of the music. Listening to the different parts, he could not experience their sequentiality, due to the lack of structural functioning affected by the drug. The reciprocal link between the musical parts (their coherence) vanished, creating a confusion that scattered the emotional impact. Sacks therefore assumes that the part of the brain responding to the emotionality of the musical experience, differs from the part managing structure and form. Not only these emotions provoked by music, are generated differently than other emotions:

“And the fact that one may have not only a selective loss of musical emotion but an equally selective sudden musicophilia (...) implies that the emotional response to music may have a very specific physiological basis of its own, one which is distinct from that of emotional responsiveness in general.”⁹

Sacks also describes cases of Amusia¹⁰ where, after a trauma, the structural recognition of music was not damaged or altered, but only the emotional reaction was lacking- the patients could acknowledge the structure of a musical piece and be intrigued by it, but had no longer any kind of emotional connotations to it. They could tell the difference from the emotional impact that other forms of art could evoke in them, from the apathetic impact of music.¹¹

In this line of thoughts, one could conclude, that without the logical, structural rationalization, the emotional response loses its effect. Our emotional experience of music is dependent on the logical processing, and the same would count when it comes to singing- The emotional linked to melody, and the logical to its form and the language within. Assuming that the logical processing of the musicality (form) of the voice, is linked to the absorption of language and its semantics, they altogether accomplish/accentuates

9. Sacks, pp.290

10. Brain-disorder, due to damage or congenital, where the musical recognition and memory are affected. (Sacks pp.123)

11. Sacks, pp.333

the emotional response. Or to put it as Dolar, for the voice to fully overcome the semantic, it needs the signifier- the voice is an “*expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning- it needs the signifier as a limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond.*”¹²

The pure voice alone has a weaker effect, than when put together with the limits of the text. It’s essence shines through its opposition, the expanding power of melody comes to expression when captured in the system and margins of the text. It seems like the same mechanism- musical parts have to be organized by the brain, first note by note, into what we perceive as a melody, then to make sense and coherently give the emotional impression, these melodies have to have a relation one to the other, in their sequence. Likewise, words first have to be analyzed by the single sounds and notes they consist of, to make sense- and then organized in sequence (sentence), to give an understanding of their corresponding meaning.

The two main regions of the brain, where language is proven to be processed, are called Broca’s area and Wernicke’s area¹³ . Wernicke’s area is where the comprehension of language and the communicative abilities are developed. Broca’s area is more related to speech. Both are regions of the brain where thoughts, feelings, impressions are translated into words and further activated for communicative purposes, all based on symbolic de-codification¹⁴.

These areas are active in the dominant hemisphere of the brain (mostly left-hemisphere), though, the activity of, and connection to the less-dominant hemisphere is believed to be of great importance. In cases of aphasia¹⁵, where the left brain hemisphere is damaged (hereunder Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas), it is possible to regain the abilities of speech, but by appealing to the other hemisphere,

12. Dolar ,p.30

13. Named after neurologists Pier Paul Broca and Carl Wernicke.

14. Brain and Mind -Ciba Foundation Symposium 69 - John Wiley And Sons 2009, pp. 391

15. Disfunction of the language related areas in the brain, after brain damage, such as strokes, cancer, traumas ecc. (Sacks pp. 330)

the less-dominant (the right). This was assumed, after realizing that patients, who lost their ability to speak- still were able to sing.

His conclusion is then, that language is somehow accumulated in other areas of the brain, but differently “stored”- like in the case of singing. The semantic reading of words and the cognitive process of (listening to the) singing, is different from the one of reading, because it involves the musical element. But even though the way that our brain decodes the words of a song and translates them (and assembly them, in the case of reproduction-the patient singing instead of talking) differs from the “logical” sense, the words are still captured and integrated, but- there is a parallel vocabulary and cognitive action taking place. This is why, when the “main” center of communication is damaged, it is possible to take recourse to this alternative system¹⁶.

A simple example of how language is assimilated in parallel to music/song, that most people would recognize, is when hearing a sentence (often just a very short sequence of words) evokes a song with the same lyrics: If I say/write “once upon a time”, many would automatically hear the song line from Gloria Gaynor’s “I will survive”, or Bonnie Tylers “Total Eclipse of the Heart”, (or even remember the music from “Once upon a time in the West”)

“Once upon a time, I was petrified,”

“Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I’m only falling apart”

This immediate reaction have little to do with the significance of the words. The relation between the sentence just heard, and the song that comes to our memory is purely vocal- often, when listening to a song, the words we hear are scarcely perceived because of their meaning, but primarily analyzed by their sonic value. This simply shows that the recognition of the sounds is much more

16. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKTdMV6cOZw>

immediate then the rational “intellectual” one. On the other hand, there sometimes happen to be a more delicate or sophisticated sub-conscious mechanism. I lately experienced, being in a difficult personal situation, and in the middle of the critical moment, that the Kate Bush song “Mother stands for comfort” popped into my mind. I hadn’t heard the record in a long time, and I don’t remember to ever have considered the fact, that it contained the word “mother”. Still, without realizing it, I assimilated the lyrics of the song, and in a situation of need, I unconsciously recalled the consoling features of the mother-figure. In this case the text got unconsciously stored in my head without me realizing it, and was triggered back, evoked by the feeling that the words were describing¹⁷. (So the words were not only analyzed by their sonic and semantic value, but they were likewise connected to a certain situation and feeling). not only analyzed by their sonic and semantic value, but they were likewise connected to a certain situation and feeling).

Little is known about this more “unconscious” way of assimilating language in music, but one could dare to say, that being a counterpart to the rational and logical way, this is a more sensorial, and maybe “creative”¹⁸ way of perceiving words. We might normally be stuck in a certain semantic field, where our logic around the experience of words is limited. If one sees our way of communication, as a system of assemblage, as a puzzle then the way language is perceived

17. Another way in which music affects memory, is in cases of amnesia or Alzaimers. Patients, who almost totally lost their memory and live in conditions of deep confusion and therefore dis-attachment to the outer world, have a very strong response to music. Music somehow becomes the key to their memory, enabling them to access parts of their memory, that else-wise would be hermetically sealed by the illness. (Sacks p.232-235) The case of aphasia explained before, where patients that lost the use of speech, slowly could with the help of music require a very limited version of their semantic memory, has the same limits as amnesia; Here the semantic memory is intact, but this alone is not enough without the episodic memory, that can put all elements together in one overview. So where music (especially singing) before opened up for an alternative “language-storage”, it opens up in cases of amnesia, for memories, entire emotional episodes that otherwise would be unattainable. So, in the first case, music works unconsciously on an intellectual, semantic level (language), in the second, on an emotional level (memories). This shows how the effect of music (in a normal functioning brain) works on both levels of consciousness, and that these two spheres are not dissociable

through music, consists of the same parts (words) and elements (signification), but assembled and organized in patterns that we still haven't defined.¹⁹

The intimate assimilation of words that we experience in reading (a poem, a novel), is impossible to achieve equally from listening to a song. To do that, our whole semantic awareness should be nullified, put to status quo, and another kind of semantic could be adopted (or brought to light, unraveled from the threads of the unconscious, since it is already there).

Though the solution might already be in the problematic itself- the emotional impact of music (that I before described as possibly an interference to the semantic understanding of text), might in this case be the key to the "unconscious language", this other kind of semantic. The emotional impact of music, shouldn't therefore restrict the textual- delimiting the text to a mere description corresponding to feelings, but should only trigger a kind of association-system that normally belongs to the unconscious. The musical presence, should not simplify the function of the language to the one of narrative and description. It should only be the triggering motion put to the domino-brick, and gravity, in this case the unconscious, would do the rest.

18. I'm here using the word creative, as the counterpart to logical, still concerning the neurological terms. The notion of the brain functioning with the division of a creative left-part and a logical right-part, is not approved by neurologists, since it is to clumsy of a simplification. We understand actions linked to the senses as creative, and the ones linked to the intellect as logical- but there are no brain-functions called as such. Though, this differentiation of terms is valid in a matter of consciousness. What is called a logical function in the brain is meant as conscious- while the creative function, is connected to the unconscious
19. It is here interesting to consider the differences between "normal" languages and tone-languages (like for instance the chinese languages and vietnamese). These are languages, where the tonal value of a word differs it from another. Changing the tonal value, the word can change significance, become a different word. Studies show that the absolute ear is more common in these countries as a consequence of this bigger awareness of tonal importance, in the daily praxis of speaking. Imagining this broader musical awareness of listening, the experience of language in music most seem to have the potentiality of being even more nuanced, with wider possibilities of unconscious language-assimilation linked to the musicality of words. This shows the essential link between music and language, or more precisely, the already inborn and unavoidable musicality of language.

**From-your-lips-
she-drew**

[frəm jər lɪps ʃi dru]

*“Myth is a type of speech (...) what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form (...) since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse (...) Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law (...) which forbids talking about things”.*²⁰

One could turn Barthes’s last words to “For there is no law, which forbids singing about things.” And even more one is tempted to turn his statement around, and say that if speech is a type of myth, to sing is a type of myth, and its fetish potentials inevitable. If language is the discourse, the “message” that accompanies an object, and thereby is a myth, singing is the absolute myth, by its signifying structures, carried by its musical nature (the music adding another discourse then “just” the one of language/text). Following Barthes’ thoughts, coming to an “oral” state is indeed the metamorphosis of the object to myth. Object is silent, closed (obtuse) and human, while myth is revelation through sound, through the voice, divine.

Though it seems as this divinity is still consumed by the society, who gave it the sovereignty of divine. When the object becomes voice, it becomes susceptible to the norms of society, and this action is vital for its existence. It merely becomes alive in this motion. And here we enter its fetish tendencies- If society is to set the norms for its structure and existence, these will always tend to be in use of the desire and drives, lusts, as happens with the female voice. I will come to that later.

Oliver Sacks talks about how the human brain is disposed to create narratives, stories. The natural questions that we deal with coming to the world, are thereby satisfied- by creating stories, and myths as

20. Roland Barthes *Mythologies* The Noonday Press 1991, pp. 107. Roland Barthes *Mythologies* The Noonday Press 1991, pp. 107.

answers. “*There are some conditions of the brain, predisposed to mystical and religious thinking- for example epileptic crises in the temporal lobe, evoking mystical visions.*”²¹ We could go so far to say, that all language originally came from the urge to formulate stories, and creating myths. As the magical word ABRACADABRA depicts- “I create as I speak”²² These narratives were often carried by the singing, and its tempting to assume that the origin of religion is closely linked to singing. The function of language put into music, was the base of religious predicaments and auspices. The awareness of the expressive and communicative power of melody and rhythmical repetition has always been at the core of this junction (between music and language), not to mention sacred words in rituals and exorcism.

Singing was for the Aboriginals of Australia the main constructive part of their collective consciousness, becoming together with the walking, the physicality of the spiritual “path” of every individual²³. In Vedic religion singing is the essential structure of the religion itself. Vedic Chanting required extreme self-discipline in the act of remembering large amounts of text, in connection to melody and particular movements. The essence of the prayer consists in striving for perfection in the performance of these chants, hereby leading to illumination.²⁴ The ritualistic use of the voice, has the tendency of devotion to the voice’s pure phonetic value (*viva voce*). The melodic aspect of the voice is essential exactly because

21. Oliver Sacks, interview (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AnuxDdg2II>)

22. Kushner, Lawrence. *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk*. Jewish Lights Publishing (1998). p. 11

23. Bruce Chatwin’s book “*Songlines*” explains the what the Aboriginals call “Dream-tracks” or Songlines, the system in which they orientated in the land by “singing the land to existence” (pp. 55-61) Their belief was, that their ancestors who walked the land for the first time, traced the first paths by singing them. Every man and woman born on the land, is therefore born on one of these Songlines, and learns this song from childhood, then when migrating to wherever it is needed, entering a new path, one tribe can exchange its song to the other. This is very roughly explained and simplified, since many more elements are involved, as the fact of destiny-being born into a certain route to persist. The main thought is how it was firmly believed that by singing things, they became reality.

24. The documentary *Altar of Fire* from 1975 by Robert Gardner, depicts the Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala (India) performing Vedic Chanting in a particular ritual called Agnicayana, in veneration of their God of fire Agni. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mYu_Ckh_K8).

of its lack of contribution to the religious content; its decorational features makes the words spiritually elevated and effective:

“Those words, carefully stored on paper and in memory, can acquire performative strength only if they are relegated to the voice, and it is as if the use of the voice will ultimately endow these words with the character of sacredness (...) because of- the fact that the voice does not add anything to their content (...) It appears that this use of the voice echoes the supposedly archaic voice, the voice not bound by logos”²⁵

The voices’ power to escape the logos, seems likewise essential in Vedic chant. Originally the Four Vedas were religious prayers, only verbally transmitted. Their peculiarity lies in the tortuous recitation, involving movements of the head according to particular words and tunes. The precision of the recital lays in its tonality, pronunciation and accent, all factors that defines the strength of the prayer²⁶(also called ‘Divine Chanting’). Devotion is not only linked to the preservation and remembrance of the sacred texts, but also to the sacredness of their very phonetic performance. The Vedic Chanting is an example of how the text only can attain its importance becoming vocal- through its pronunciation and sound, its musical values. This junction comes closer to what would be the earlier mentioned sensual utopia, where none of the elements are shadowing the other, but are actually, totally dependent on each other, to simply exist.

This balance of elements, precision of performance and equal preservation of the textual value, might be a way to avoid the voice alone falling into excessive glorification, or the text drowning the musicality in intellect and signification.

25. Dolar pp.107

26. Arthur Anthony Macdonnell A Vedic Grammar for Students, Motilal Banarsidass publ. 1916.

The radical statement of Hildegard of Bingen²⁷, declared not only that music in general is the essence of divinity, but that “*if God is the musical principle “par excellence” and the Divine word attains its true dimension only in the singing voice, then the radical consequences could follow that the mere word belongs to the devil*”²⁸ According to her, the Devil is male, and cannot sing. The purely semantic is equal to the pure evil, lacking the divine intention of intonation.

So the problem does not only lay in the way of performing the singing- but in the general attitude towards the value of the text and its coming to life by the orality of the words.

In Frank Herbert’s science-fiction novel *Dune*, and David Lynch’s adaption of it, the use of the voice has something in common with the Divine Chanting, the belief in the divine power of sound- though used very differently. The power of the ‘Voice’ is a skill belonging to the female²⁹- consisting in controlling the emission of sound waves in such a way, that the listener can physically and subconsciously be manipulated.

“Some thoughts have a certain sound. That being the equivalent of a form. Through sound and motion you’ll be able to paralyse nerves, scatter bones (...)”

The main character learns this power and uses it in a revolution. The power of the voice is (again) of purely feminine origin inhabiting notions of temptation and motherly commanding obedience, and somehow by being put into the body of a male, it acquires even more strength. Despite this, the voice is a neutral power by its essence, tending both to Divinity and Profanity.

27. Hildegard von Bingen (1098 - 17 September 1179) was a German writer and Benedictine abbess. She wrote several theological and medicinal texts, as well as a large amount of music, mainly for voice. (Hildegard von Bingen’s *Physica*, Inner Traditions / Bear & Co, 1998)

28. Dolar, pp.50

29. In the movie and novel *Dune*, the main character is a mutt between human and alien, what provides him extraordinary strength- the most powerful of his skills, he inherited from his mother, the power of “The Voice”- the mother is a member of the Bene Gesserit order- an only female sisterhood of witch-like figures, of extreme mental and physical power.

“I can kill with a word!”- “And his word shall carry death eternal”

**She's-a-lady-
whoa-whoa-whoa**
[ʃiz ə ledi wo wo wo]

It is unavailable to mention, the discussion around the junction between music, voice and text, the gender division between femininity and masculinity. Already in ancient Chinese and Greek societies, the sceptical question about the validity of the voice was raised, and the thought was to “*Let the music follow the sense of the words. Keep it simple and ingenious. One must condemn pretentious music which is devoid of sense and effeminate*”.³⁰ It was somehow already suggested, that the voice, becoming independent from the text, can be dangerous, entailing feminine and seductive characters:

*“(...) the main concerns, , which will recur throughout history with astonishing obstinacy, are already there in a nutshell: music, and in particular the voice, should not stray away from words which endow it with sense; as soon as it departs from its textual anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening- all the more because of its seductive and intoxicating powers. Furthermore, the voice beyond sense is self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the text, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigmatic opposition on the side of masculinity. (...) the voice beyond words is a senseless play of sensuality, it possesses a dangerous attractive force, although it in itself is empty and frivolous.”*³¹

The voice, as the medium of utterance, when used without logos, is dangerous and sinful, by being a mere form without function. Senseless sound is sinful. And according to Plato, the filtration can be done, separating useless from useful, by making a distinction between the sorrowful versus strong harmonics. The first division actually occurs in the elementary difference between major tonalities being hard (*durus*) and the minor being soft (*mollis*). (Or as Leonard Cohen says it “*The minor fall and the major lift*”³²) Thereafter, the different harmonies are categorized.³³

For Plato the question is not whether or not music should be accepted or used in society, it is more a matter of division between

30. Poizat, Michel *La voix du diable* (1991) Paris: Métailié, pp.197-198

31. Dolar, pp.43

32. See the explanation here, <http://rock.genius.com/Leonard-cohen-hallelujah-lyrics#note-36706> and listen here, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrLk4vdY28Q>

music that accentuates the audacity and gallantry of men in war, and music that weakens their tenacity. So, there is not only a gender division between text and music, but also within the musical structure itself- some harmonies are categorized as feminine, by their softening (mollifying) tendencies, while others are defined as masculine by their strength and vitality (*durus*).

There is a suspicious attitude towards both the act of singing itself (in general), and the harmonies in which it moves and operates. The same mentality counts for the wind instruments being banned, for the fact of acting as '*substitutes for the voice*'³⁴ and something more likely to be played by women.

We might ask ourselves if there still are traces of this tendency of gender-division in music, in our modern perception of the singing. Do we still condemn the voice detached from the content, to being frivolous and feminine, or does it add a divine presence to the song?

There are several female figures that are especially related to the voice in Greek mythology. Above all in the myth of the cicadas. The first men to encounter the Muses "*were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it.*"³⁵ The Muses then, of pity, transformed these men into cicadas, so that they could sing forever. In this story lies the original lethality of song- the singing of the Muses was so overwhelming that men "*were taken to death by the pleasure of song*"³⁶. After this episode, pre-

33. "We were saying, when we spoke of the subject-matter, that we had no need of lamentations and strains of sorrow?-True.-And which are the harmonies expressive of sorrow? You are musical and can tell me.-The harmonies which you mean are the mixed or tenor Lydian, and the full-toned or bass Lydian, and such-like.- These then, I said, must be banished; even to women who have a character to maintain they are of no use, and much less to men.-Certainly.-In the next place, drunkenness and softness and indolence are utterly unbecoming the character of our guardians.-Utterly unbecoming?-And which are the soft and convivial harmonies?-The Ionian,- he replied, -and some of the Lydian which are termed "relaxed".- Well, and are these of any use for warlike men?-Quite the reverse,- he replied;- and if so the Dorian and the Phrygian are the only ones which you have left." (Plato Republic, book III, 398)

34. Dolar, pp.45

35. Plato ,Phaedrus, 245a.

36. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, Stanford University Press 2005, pp.101

cautions were probably made, and the Muses started singing only to the poets. The poet and him only, had the power to resist this deathly inundation of the voice, and translate its stories to something understandable by normal human- “*His privileged relationship with the Muse consists in a superhuman power to hear the absolute tale and make it into a story (...) humanly audible*”.³⁷ Finally the sirens of Homer³⁸ who originally were half-bird-half women. They had the same ‘absolute knowledge’³⁹ and power of singing as the Muse, but where the Muses reserved their wisdom to the poets, the sirens sang for whoever approached their cost, not sparing anybody their lethality⁴⁰. Their fish-attributes and tempting beauty were all elements added in a later interpretation, and their singing turned from narrative, to purely vocal.⁴¹

Here lays the crucial problematic: The voice becomes the essence of female beauty and temptation. Already being lethal, when the narrative is removed, this vocal abundance is accentuated- and “*The entire pathos is concentrated on the deadly, seductive circuit between voice and hearing, sound and ear. (...) the sirens produce an acoustic pleasure that kills men.*”⁴²

The lack of mercy of the sirens, is in contrast with the caution of the Muses. The sirens’ demonstrative way of sharing, conscious of its consequences, their sensuality- not only the later acquired physical sensuality, but also the original sonic one of the voice as narrative of total truth, gives them almost a status of challenging Goddesses, proposing the ones who wants to hear total truth, to die in their greed.

37. Cavarero, pp.98

38. Homer The Odyssey, Penguin Books, 1997

39. “(...) just like the Muses, the divine singers (sirens) narrate musically the things that they saw happen on the Trojan plane and all over the earth. They know all, completely and in detail, because they see all.” (Cavarero, pp. 105)

40. “Simple sailors can hear from the sirens what the Muse only reserved for the poet.” (Cavarero, pp.105)

41. Cavarero, pp.107

42. Cavarero, pp.104

**Because-we're-
living-in-a-
material-world**
[bɪkɒz wɪr lɪvɪŋ ɪn ə
mətɪrɪəl wɜːld]

The tempting nature of singing itself⁴³, was used by Homer as a tool to enhance the narrative- and the choice of giving it a female form, decisive for later interpretation. When the narrative and semantic later were removed from the singing of the sirens, the power and status of the female figure was reduced to pure sensuality, pure voice, and the role of the female, doomed to superficiality- a hollow shell, without its kernel;

“A decisive symbolic gesture takes speech away from the sirens, leaving only the voice (...) the sirens survive as an image, but no longer as Homer’s image”⁴⁴

The feminine, gaining in the first place the position of the element of musical temptation, lost on the other hand credibility, almost as a punishment, or regulation of value. And this superficiality of the female voice seems to have nourished many later categorizations of the (female) voice, giving it a fetish-character, that might still affect our view on it.

Adorno writes about the fetish-character of music:

“There is no lack of pointing and sentimental comments assessing the current musical condition of the masses as one of “degeneration”. The most tenacious of these motifs is that of sensuality, which allegedly enfeebles and incapacitates heroic behaviour (...) If the moments of pleasure in the idea, the voice (and) the instrument are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them any meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational emotions which form the relationship to music, into which those with no relationship enter.”⁴⁵

43. It is vital here to remember the fact that the sirens of Homer where not beautiful “the sirens are horrible and murderous monsters (...) surrounded by the dead corpses of male sailors. And their repellent character has a precise role in Homer’s poetry- namely, to guarantee that their charm comes only from song, or from the epic performance” (Cavarero, p.108)

44. Cavarero, pp.108

45. Theodor W. Adorno *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ‘On The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening’ Psychology Press, 2001, pp. 272

And what concerns specifically the voice:

“At its most passionate, musical fetishism takes possession of the public valuation of singing voices. Their sensuous magic is traditional as is the close relation between success and the person endowed with “material”. But today it is forgotten that it is material. For music vulgar materialists, it is synonymous to have a voice and to be a singer. In earlier epoches, technical virtuosity, at least, was demanded of singing stars, the castrati and Prima Donnas. Today the material as such, destitute of any function, is celebrated.”⁴⁶

The voice is celebrated for its materiality, in the name of its sensuality, and this veneration of it is what in the end neutralizes its real sensuality. The singing voice becomes therefore, before the language even makes its entrance in the discourse, an outlined object whose only utility is limited to its own status. Its structure becomes hollow and at the same time rigidly hermetic for any meaning to fulfill its being. When the singing voice acquires its aesthetical status and thereby entertaining values it bounces back every meaning that is attempted to be put in it.

The projection of our own incapability to declare independency from aesthetic standards, is what forms the voice’s potentiality of being an aesthetic object. Our expectations about it, delineates the status of the singer as the center of attraction, the Idol/Diva-status, becomes another distracting element in the delivery of the message/text. When the singing became physical in the modern figure of the sirens, the object of pleasure gained a body.

And what is then again the voice of this body?

46. Theodor W. Adorno *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ‘On The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening’ Psychology Press, 2001, pp. 277.

**Body-talk,-
talk-body-to-me**
[badi tɔk, tɔk badi
tu mi]

From country to doom-metal and pop-music, we find the phenomena of musical-interjections. A rather underestimated element of the singing, which seems to be the expression of a body restrained by semantics, who finally, by the schematic rules (requirements) of composition, acquires an equal place, as the word.

*My hands are shaky and my knees are weak
I can't seem to stand on my own two feet
Who do you thank when you have such luck?
I'm in love
I'm all shook up
Mn mm oh, oh, yeah yeah!*

In other examples, these emissions appear almost as patches, when the text is not sufficient, or its syntax won't match the melody-line.

Compared to the Elvis lyrics, the one of Cartoons take it even further, by turning the musical-interjections into the main substance of the text, having the "real words" as a minority:

*Uhh eh eh uh ah ah
Ting tang walla walla bing bang
Uhh eh eh uh ah ah
Ting tang walla walla bing bang Ting tang walla walla bing bang
(Duh Duh DoDo)
I told the Witch Doctor I was in love with you
(Duh Duh DoDo)
I told the Witch Doctor I was in love with you
(Duh Duh DoDo)
And the Witch Doctor he told me what to do
He told me
Uhh eh eh uh ah ah
Ting tang walla walla bing bang
Uhh eh eh uh ah ah
Ting tang walla walla bing bang Ting tang walla walla bing bang*

These musical-interjections can be seen as the physicality of the voice, transcribed into elements of the lyrics. These are, so to say, the abilities of the voice, the “left-overs” of semantic, the “meaningless” sounds, not important to the intellect, but essential to the physical appeal.

The surplus of the voice, the singers abilities, technical skills and stylistic choices, are all linked to this bodily excess of the voice. This is the point where the essence of the voice, as a bodily presence, literally takes command over the semantic.

These “sounds of the body” might create a gap between the singer, and the receiver. Experiencing this bodily presence of the singer, the roles get clearly defined, and the domain over the text, set. It is at this point, that the adoration can grow and the singer become a sexual object- resulting in the birth of Idols, Divas, myths, and creating the danger of fetish.

In music, the general relation to text seems to be more determined by the notion of possession- the roles of narrator and receiver are heavier marked, of who has the “dominion” of the “telling voice”. Where this line has been blurred in literature, the narrator in some cases almost vanished, to let the text be its own dictator, the division of labour is still very present in the case of song. The voice of the singer, by its bodily presence, delineates the source of thought, asserting that the immersion of the listener is mainly empathic- related to another person- As a listener, most of the times, you relate to the text being sung, by feeling and understanding through the voice singing= through another person (physical and emotional appeal). In this sense, the text in songs, is always auto-biographical, not necessarily to the singer as a person, but still to his/her voice.

The voice cannot lie, the voice of singing is bound to its utterance. Or is it?

In 1972 the song ‘Prisencolinensinaiciniusol’ by the Italian singer Adriano Celentano was released and gained great success on the Italian hit parades⁴⁷. The song was entirely written in gibberish

English. The only purpose of it was to sound American in the ears of Italians, gaining a true rock'n'roll status.

*Ai ai smai sesler eni els so co uil piso ai
in de col men seivuan prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait
ai ai smai senflecs eni go for doing peso ai
in de col men seivuan prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait*

This solely non-semantic affection and immediate response is evidence of how singing moves us, or more precisely- the intention of a message is enough to rise the feeling of cohesion in us. Like a “phantom” recognition, we react on the action of ‘giving ones voice’, equals expressing some kind of feeling, emotionally sustained by the musical element. As it often occurs, the idea can be stronger than the truth, and the moment of (textual) revelation unnecessary- or even devastatingly disappointing. It is not only the music and the pure voice that invades us and calls for a reaction- it is the awareness of a message being sung, a meaning being present, and this urge to manifest ones whatever common belief, is appealing. Here lays the secret behind the phenomenon of ‘singing along’- even (especially) when the text is not understood, the body follows.

Roland Barthes deals with the physicality of the singing, through his term ‘grain’.⁴⁸ From the starting-point that the traditional way of commenting on music is limited, when “*translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective*”⁴⁹ and this due to the fact, that by turning music into a subject of discussion, the listener tends to give it almost human and social attributes, “*rude, austere, virile, proud*” or “*allegro, andante*”. And here emerges the idea of music being communicative, personal and expressive. He addresses the singing, as the actual place where music and language meet- the grain of the

47. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRV9gr9Y0oM>) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisencolinensinainciusol>

48. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text The Grain of The Voice*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978

49. Barthes, pp. 179 Barthes, pp. 182

voice. This for Barthes, the opportunity that music has through the voice, to achieve an amalgamation with language, through language itself- through diction. He distinguishes between two ways of singing, pheno-song as the expressive, dramatic and communicative and geno-song as the “*apex of production where the melody really works at the language- not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers, its letters*”.⁵⁰ Simply- in pheno-song, the singers’ “style” has the function of translating feelings and images, while geno-song lets the language talk for itself, without affecting it, without coloring it by personal assumptions. Barthes seems reluctant towards the pheno-song, and points out, that these communicative attributes belong to social and cultural matters, and by entering the field of music, can obfuscate its means/possibilities- what again reminds of the fetish tendencies.

In the same way he describes how the geno-song (in a Russian choir) is not personal “(*... a body which has no civil identity, no ‘personality’*)”⁵¹ but yet individual- a neutral body where the grain is “*the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue*”.⁵² A way of singing, not bound to the “*rules of the genre*” and the tradition of interpreting language in the singing act- a voice coming from “*deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages*”,⁵³ an archaic voice.

The body cannot be separated from the word in song, its presence can’t and shouldn’t be removed from singing, but being a figure of representation, commanding its expressivity towards what is socially understood and accepted, it obfuscates the possibilities of language. When singing becomes too aware, conscious about its communicative power, too clearly appealing to the emotions, dramatic, it becomes decorative, and instead of facilitating language, it makes it poor and superfluous. It doesn’t strengthen the word, but becomes a caricature of it- narrowing it down to a singular and monotone significance, one feeling that we can socially recognize.

50. Barthes, pp. 182

51. Barthes, pp. 182

52. Barthes, pp. 182

53. Barthes, pp. 183

Like a cultural filter.

A more sober way of singing would instead let language be assimilated in a way closer to the unconscious recognition of words, which I mentioned before.

Are-you-passionate?
[ɑr ju pæʃənət?]

We deal with time, body and intellect when we are listening to singing. And to not let these elements interfere on the costs of language might be an utopia.

Though the *grain* of Barthes strives for a devotion similar way to the Vedic Chanting- devotion to the divinity of diction, divinity of language, divinity of the word. He wants the performer to be humble to the word. I see this attitude towards singing, as a way to avoid the fetish character of it, and all the implications of its aesthetics, in the same way that the religious dedication to pure singing as pure delivery of the sacred word, is free from the interference of the ego, from interpretation.

The limitations of temporality, as mentioned before, and the expectation of the singing and its tradition, the feminine, aesthetic value given to the voice, have not only limited our attention towards the textual aspect. Where poetry has moved away from the use of language based on narrative and some kind of logical representation of images, song-lyrics are still lacking this detachment. And this might be due to the adoration of the voice, to the immediate impact of music, that creates an emotional response, that satisfies our senses, not leaving enough space for the language to unfold.

The limitations of temporality in singing, shouldn't therefore be a reason to diminish the level of the text. It seems that the tradition of song writing is stagnated into a very indicative narrative, not giving the listener enough liability for his/her own approach. At the extremity, the music genres that deal with more "advanced" or at least dense song writing are also the ones very poor on the melodic, like rap and 'spoken word' (the last might not even be classified as music) I find it as depriving for the art of singing, to turn melody to its minimum, for the enhancement of the text, as vice versa. Instead, the way that the sounds of musical interjections camouflage themselves as semiotic elements, is a fair compromise, that maintains the influence of both elements. I see a crucial link between the way that musical interjections enter the semantic world on equal conditions, and the unconscious assimilation of words. If we accept these senseless bodily utterances as equally contributing to the final experience, we can as well explore a more abstract, frag-

mented writing, applied to singing. Creating a more scattered, “automatic” writing, that appeals to an unconscious assimilation, would automatically remove the attention from the performer- turning one voice into many voices, many significations- and the element of singing into a pure medium.

Bibliography:

- Cavarero, Adriana** — *For More Than One Voice*,
Stanford University Press, 2005
- Dolar, Mladen** — *A Voice and Nothing More*,
Short Circuit, MIT Press, 2006
- Barthes, Roland** — *Image-Music-Text The Grain of The Voice*,
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978
- Herbert, Frank** — *Dune*,
Ace Books, 1965
- Sacks, Oliver** — *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*,
Knopf, 2007
- Chatwin, Bruce** — *The Songlines*,
Penguin Books, 1988
- Barthes, Roland** — *Mythologies*,
The Noonday Press, 1991
- Adorno Theodor W.** — *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass
Culture, 'On The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of
Listening'*,
Psychology Press, 2001
- Homer** — *The Odyssey*,
Penguin Books, 1997
- Poizat, Michel** — *La voix du diable*,
Paris: Métailié, 1991
- Plato** — *Phaedrus*,
245a.
- Hildegard von Bingen's** — *Physica, Inner Traditions*,
Bear & Co, 1998
- Arthur Anthony Macdonnell, Arthur Anthony** — *A Vedic
Grammar for Students*,
Motilal Banarsidass publ., 1916
- Kushner, Lawrence** — *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living
Spiritual Talk*,
Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998

- Sacks, Oliver** — *interview*,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AnuxDdg2II>
- Vv.Aa.** — *Brain and Mind -Ciba Foundation Symposium 69*,
John Wiley And Sons, 2009
- Marx, Carl** — *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*,
Penguin Books Limited, 1976
- Alley, T.R** — “*Food Neophobia and Sensation Seeking*”. *Handbook of Behavior, Food and Nutrition*.
Springer. K.A. Potter, 2011

Links:

radiolab.org/story/91512-musical-language/
youtube.com/watch?v=SdhAfMor9BM
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisencolinensinainciusol
youtube.com/watch?v=yRV9gr9Y0oM
youtube.com/watch?v=dKTdMV6cOZw
youtube.com/watch?v=2mYu_Ckh_K8
nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/Pages/Age-Related-Hearing-Loss.aspx