Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera
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Chapter 6

Voice and Gender Standing Apart

In Part 1, I demonstrated how the relationship between the singing body and the voice in postopera is reinvented with the aid of technology, and how and why the singing appears beyond the body that produces it. Part 2 offered an analysis of how the singing body and the voice become desynchronous through a specific reinvention of the relationship between what is heard and what is seen at the same time in postopera. Part 3 will examine the discursive ‘friction’ that appears between the singing body and the voice in relation to gender. The theoretical objects are two postoperas where the relationship between body, voice and gender is questioned through singing: La Commedia by Louis Andriessen and Hal Hartley and Homeland by Laurie Anderson. In both works, the issue of body-voice-gender relationship is interrogated in connection with what is conventionally perceived as the singing female voice. In La Commedia, Dante, sung by a female singer, is divided further into two characters, feminine and masculine, that appear simultaneously. In Homeland, Anderson introduces a certain kind of ‘vocal masquerade’ by electronic processing of her voice to sound masculine, with the help of a harmonizer (pitch shifting device).322

This chapter will initially investigate the postdramatic condition of La Commedia by elaborating on its multiplying narratives, deconstructing characters, and ways of mediating stage events. The singing body in La Commedia is affected by the specific postdramatic condition of the piece that engages several narratives simultaneously, two sets of characters related to different ‘stories’, and complex and asynchronous events on stage involving different media. All of these elements affect the presence of the singing body of Dante, making the relationship between the body and the voice ambiguous promoting a reinvention of the voice-gender relation. The body-voice relationships within the singing characters are first reinvented with the help of these procedures, and only later comes the vocal travesty of the principal character. Towards the end of the chapter, my focus will be on vocal travesty in relation to the character of Dante, and on the way that gender is related to that vocalic body.

I will analyze the body-voice-gender relationship by using the theoretical concept of ‘unveiled voices’ by Joke Dame that aims to dismantle stereotypes of vocal representation in relation 

322 Tereza Havelkova introduces the concept of vocal masquerade in an analogy with the concept of masquerade by the film theorist Mary Ann Doane. Havelkova states: “The notion of vocal masquerade presupposes that even when text-less, vocal expression is culturally coded. The vocal masquerade would then involve a presentation of a vocal gesture not as a direct emanation of the female body but rather as a sign of femininity”. See: Tereza Havelkova, “Bodily Presence or Vocal Masquerade? Performing the Feminine Through Extended Vocality”, conference paper read at Song, Stage, Screen conference held at University of Winchester, Winchester, UK, September 2010, manuscript.
to gender. I use Dame’s theory, which relativizes the relationship between voice, sex and gender, to examine how this is manifest in the case of La Commedia’s Dante character. A remark is needed here about the materials I use for the analysis of this postopera. The singing bodies of the principal characters in La Commedia (Dante, Lucifer and Beatrice) appear to be ‘divided’ between their stage and film presence. The voice refers to multiple bodies, and is de-synchronized, detached from those bodies at the same time. That detachment is different in the video/film recording of the opera (also directed by Hartley) which is used for the purposes of this analysis, due to the fact that the perspective of the spectator is suggested by the medium of film, while in the live performed piece one can choose between other perspectives for perceiving the piece, since a spectator’s view is not ‘directed’ as it is in the film. This is to some extent true for the difference between any of the analyzed pieces performed live and their recordings. For La Commedia, however, it may be of particular importance, due to the extreme density of the events happening on stage. When experiencing the opera from the DVD, the ‘density’ of the simultaneous events is still the same as in the live performance, but different perspectives that could be experienced in live performance are all unified in the recording. Thus, although my analysis is primarily based on the information I acquire from the DVD recording and the score, I use my impressions from the live performance as well. Although these two sources are different, I believe that by relying on them both it is possible to achieve consistent analysis since my own view of the piece is based on both what I experienced during its live performance in Amsterdam, and on what I could use as a reminder of that performance – the DVD recording.

Towards the Postdramatic Condition of La Commedia (1): Multiplying Narratives

Irony is what generates the drama in my opera – a satirical view of heaven and hell in our everyday life.

Louis Andriessen

Commedia by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is a poem written in the first person between 1308 and 1321. It is an allegory based primarily on the afterlife and eternal love. The poet, Virgil, is Dante’s

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324 La Commedia was premiered at Holland festival in Amsterdam theatre Carré at June 12, 2008. Louis Andriessen is both the author of music and of the libretto. Hal Hartley staged the piece and authored the film.

leader through *Hell and Purgatory*, and Beatrice, who is the feminine ideal for Dante, leads him through Heaven. The political context of Italy at that time, in particular Florence, is also embedded in the text. Dante's *Divina Commedia* (henceforth referred to as *Commedia*) is best described as an allegory and it bears many different levels of meanings. It is divided into three large parts and the plot involves the poet Dante who seeks his beloved Beatrice through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven.

The film opera *La Commedia*, inspired by Dante's poem, consists of five parts: *The City of Dis or: The Ship of Fools; Story From Hell (Racconto dall’Inferno); Lucifer; The Garden of Earthly Delights; Luce Etterna (Eternal Light)*. Besides Dante’s *Commedia*, this opera brings several other (pre)texts that are important for its genesis and/or interpretation: paintings by Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), according to which parts one and four are named, verses by the poet Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) and *Song of Songs* from the Old Testament used in the libretto.

Glass’s *La Belle et la Bête* is an “opera for ensemble and film”, and Andriessen and Hartley named *La Commedia* a “film opera”. Both pieces problematize the relationship between opera and film, but in different ways. “Film opera” appears to be a sharply accurate term for the merging of the two media – opera and film – that are of equal importance in *La Commedia*. There is the mute, black and white film divided into five parts (one for each part of the opera), projected on the big screen on stage, whose segments were ‘zoomed’ on a few smaller screens that appear and disappear during the performance in different places. And, there is the live performed opera on stage with singers, ensemble, conductor, costumes, stage set, props etc. Although it might have been expected that the events portrayed in live performance reflect the film’s occurrences (or vice versa), that is not the case – at least not in conventional terms. Opera and film, although merged into one artwork, have independent dramaturgies. What connects them is the appearance of the same actors/singers (as the same characters) both in the film and the opera. The narratives of the film and the opera both refer to *Commedia*, but in quite different ways, and that will be more elaborated during the course of this chapter.

The events represented in the film and the live opera performance do not refer to the same narrative. In Hartley’s film, the central role is given to the musical guild and their Amsterdam adventures. In Andriessen's score, there are direct references to the world of Dante’s *Commedia*, Bosch’s paintings, the Bible and Vondel’s poetry. Both Andriessen and Hartley’s narratives are related to Dante’s *Commedia*, but differently, bringing different stories and engaging partly different actors. Only three principal characters – Dante, Beatrice and Lucifer - exist both in opera and in the film, and they are played by the same singers/actors (Cristina Zavalloni, Claron McFadden and Jeroen Willems, respectively). Andriessen and Hartley even offer two parallel synopses for the opera so that

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326 Dante’s *Commedia* is also known as *Divina Commedia*. It was named *Divina* by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) considerably later.
it is presented as an intentional ‘impossible synchronization’. Hartley wrote the synopsis of the film, and Andriessen the synopsis of what happens in the score, so the synopsis of the whole opera appears as an archive of different historical, literary, musical and media texts and contexts.

Through its history, opera witnessed different attempts to hierarchize its different ‘texts’ (music, drama, staging). As the unfolding analysis of the chapter will clarify, in *La Commedia* authors manage to create complex relations between operatic texts that deny a sense of hierarchy despite their intentions to put music in a dominant position. The most compelling relationship appears to be the one between the film and the live performed opera, where film appears to be ‘of the opera’, and out of it at the same time. Or, it could be claimed that the film unfolds both ‘in’ the opera and ‘in parallel with the opera’. The relationship between those two media is reflected in large part through the singing body. The non-existent unity of the time, place and action in *La Commedia*, and on the other hand the fact that the same principal characters are always in two different contexts, and that they share the voice, makes the body-voice relationship de-synchronized. The voice is purposely disembodied by the fact that it pertains to two different characters from two different contexts at the same time.

Comparing Andriessen and Hartley’s synopses illustrates how different their vision of what happens in the film and in the opera are, and how the presence of operatic characters is affected. It is obvious that two significantly different ‘adaptations’ of Dante’s *Commedia* were made by Hartley and Andriessen. However, they did not consider this to be the obstacle for integrating their dramaturgical views in the same piece. The fact that the narratives of the film and the opera overlap constantly shifts the viewer/listener’s attention and reinforces the split between the film and the events on stage. The fact that the same actors appear in the opera and the film in the roles of principal characters makes the two plots simultaneously connected and disconnected; since the listening spectator is seeing the same actors/singers in principal roles on stage and in the film, they are expected to be in the same ‘story’, but that is not the case.

When I listened to/watched a live performance of the opera for the first time, I was not prepared for the ambiguous relationship between the film and opera. The most obvious effect this ambiguity had on my perception of the opera was a constant disturbance of the intelligibility of the plot. By routine, I was trying to ‘catch’ the story by merging what I had read in the synopsis and what I was seeing/hearing on stage. But, since I had to follow different stories, the appearance of the same characters constantly made a ‘noise’ in the denoting of the narratives and their representations in staging.

As we can see from the written tabular ‘synchronization’ of the film and music’s synopses, presented later in this chapter, Hartley’s film narrative is based on the events in relation to the
group of musicians in Amsterdam, while Andriessen’s narrative is an ironical reinterpretation of the characters in Dante’s *Commedia*. Hartley’s narrative, containing grotesque situations, could be seen as a reflection of the tradition of opera buffa. In contrast, Andriessen’s interpretation seems to reflect the tradition of opera seria. The character of Dante has the same ‘destiny’ in both narratives – Dante dies in Act IV under the wheels of different kind of vehicles. What follows is a comparison of Hartley’s and Andriessen’s synopses of *La Commedia* in order to illustrate their differences and to try to find some ‘knots’ of synchronicity:

While in the first part, *The Ship of Fools*, Hartley introduces the members of the musical guild in Amsterdam acting anarchically in their favourite bar, known as The Ship of Fools, he also introduces contemporary embodiments of Beatrice, Dante and Lucifer. Andriessen has a more metaphorical view of Dante’s epic:

### Synopsis by Hal Hartley

**Part 1: The City of Dis or: “The Ship of Fools”**

The Terrifying Orchestra of the 21st century, also known as “The Guild”, plays their music on the streets of Amsterdam. They finish for the day, divide up the money, and go to their favorite bar, the Ship of Fools, where Lucifer, a local businessman with failed political ambitions, witnesses everything. Meanwhile, two young social activists from the suburbs, Maria and Lucia, arrive in town to hand out political pamphlets during the visit to the city of a famous public figure – Beatrice. Dante, a lady television journalist from Italy, is preparing her on-camera report of this important event. Maria is saddened to see her friend Lucia seduced by the young, tattooed, horn player, Farfarello, and taken to the Ship of Fools. At the bar, the Guild get drunk, dance, argue, fight, and try to make out with each other’s wives and girlfriends. A ferocious fight breaks out between Calcabrina and Libbicocco.

### Synopsis by Louis Andriessen

**Part 1: The City of Dis or “The Ship of Fools”**

It opens with a psalm text in Latin introducing *Das Narrenschiff*, followed by the sixteenth century recruitment text for the guild of the Blue Barge. Anyone indulging in throwing dice, dancing and capering with pretty women is welcome. “With such folk the Barge is loaded.” Then Beatrice appears. She tells (in Italian) about her request for Virgil to help Dante on his expedition through the afterlife. There are some men in a boat on their way to Dis, the burning city in Hell. On the roof of the flaming towers they see screaming furies. Near the end someone walks on the water. Dante concludes the first act with the words: “I was certain that she was sent from heaven”.

Both synopses refer to the anarchic behaviour suggested also in Bosch’s painting, depicting a situation of an unusual company floating in a barge. As a metaphor for mankind, the barge is floating in an unpredictable direction, and *The Ship of Fools* becomes a powerful allegory.

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327 “Opera buffa. Comic opera. This is a term that generally refers to operas in the latter part of the eighteenth century (e.g. Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro*); however, it also has been used to refer to comic operas into the early nineteenth century (e.g. Rossini’s *Barbiere di Siviglia*). (…)” See more in: Naomi André, “Glossary”, in *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 180.

328 “‘Serious opera’. This term generally refers to operas in the latter part of the eighteenth century, but it also has been used for non-comic operas in the early nineteenth century. (…)” See more in: Naomi André, *Ibid.*

Part 2, *Story from Hell*, appears to be an episode representing Dante’s vision of the infernal (Andriessen) and on Hartley’s side it is a testimony to the worrying behaviour of the members of the musical guild:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hartley</th>
<th>Andriessen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: Story From Hell (<em>Racconto dall’Inferno</em>)&lt;br&gt;The Guild wakes up on a beach outside the city. Lucia is with them, lost and worried. Maria has followed them. Calcabrini chastises Farfarello for having brought the girl home. Alichino chooses the day’s music while Graffiacane practices her Cello. Lucia and Maria fight.</td>
<td>Part 2: Racconto dall’Inferno&lt;br&gt;Cristina, the personification of Dante, tells a funny story about one of the supreme devils, who shows her the way. This Malacoda gives Cristina an escort of ten devils. They are very frightening. While they trudge on through hell, a peculiar march is sounding.</td>
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Visions of Hell continue as Part 3, *Lucifer*. Andriessen presents Lucifer in confrontation with God, while Hartley embodies this character in the figure of a businessman interested in helping the guild of musicians:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hartley</th>
<th>Andriessen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 3: Lucifer&lt;br&gt;The Guild goes to work, but Libbicoco gets in a fight with the Police and they all get arrested, together with Lucia who has been looking on in fascination. Maria waits outside the police station as Lucifer pays for their release and enlightens them in regards to his plans to overthrow heaven. Meanwhile, Beatrice arrives at the hotel and Dante prepares for her on-camera report.</td>
<td>Part 3: Lucifer&lt;br&gt;A long instrumental introduction brings us to the deepest horrors of Hell. A choir describes Lucifer. Then Lucifer appears. He is very angry because God created man in His image. Lucifer, the angel who was always the nearest to God, is jealous. He roars out his vengefulness, and his wish to destroy Adam and Eve. He triumphs. In his final sentence he calls upon the Creator: “Alas, now I regret that I ever created man.” The texts of Part 3 come from two plays by the 17th century Dutch ‘Prince of Poets’ Joost van den Vondel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What follows is in clear contrast to this infernal atmosphere. Part 4, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, creates an allusion to Bosch’s eponymous phantasmagorical oil on wood triptych that is, with its vivid imagery and complex symbolism, the most ambitious of his paintings. It is rich in nudity and surreal situations. The first and third parts of the triptych represent Eden and Hell respectively. The central and most substantial part of the triptych is devoted to “earthly delights” featuring a considerable number of slim nude young male and female figures engaged in all kinds of sexual perversions and leisure activities, flying, and swimming. They are surrounded by fantastical ‘buildings’, giant fruit, birds, butterflies, seashells, fish, and other animals. Andriessen gives a rather fragmentary synopsis for this part that is seemingly engaged mostly with different emotions – between both friends and lovers. On the other hand, Hartley traces the steps of the musical guild further, this time exploring their emotions towards each other. Dante is killed.
**Hartley**

Part 4: The Garden of Earthly Delights

Released from prison, the Guild are set adrift on the canals of Amsterdam so as to reflect on their transgressions. Malacoda, though, has his own boat and tries to patch things up with Calcabrina. Dante gives her on-camera report and Beatrice appears on a balcony before the crowds outside the hotel. Dante, in amongst the crowd, (including members of the Guild), is so moved by Beatrice’s appearance that she accidentally steps into traffic and is run down by Beatrice’s limousine and killed.

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**Andriessen**

Part 4: De Tuin der Lusten ("The Garden of Earthly Delights")

Parts I and IV derive their titles from paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. His irreverent, funny, and surrealist paintings were an important influence for the opera. Dante, on his way to Purgatory, meets his deceased friend Casella, a musician. Casella sings one of Dante’s beautiful sonnets. Dante sings a song about a gruesome snake. Then, large birds come flying in and they chase the snake away. Dante is subsequently helped over the river Lethe and sees an impressive pageant of great beauty. He somehow gets under one of the wheels and dies. (Or is hit by a car and dies in the street.) The choir sings a text from the ‘Song of Songs’ about the bride of the Lebanon.

In the final part of the film, *Eternal Light*, both Beatrice and the guild leave the city. Andriessen brings the character of Beatrice on stage again, and the singer that took the role of Dante is now playing herself, Cristina (Zavalloni). A children’s choir ends the piece, mocking the whole situation:

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**Hartley**

Part 5: Luce Etterna

The Guild is chased out of the city. Maria and Lucia follow. Beatrice departs for the airport. Lucifer complains about the state of things in Florence and offers us his advice. A crowd of children run in and out and warn us that even if we do not know what’s going on, they do. Throughout all this, the Workers in Purgatory receive instructions from their superiors to remove a soul from its period of penance and send it on up to Paradise.

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**Andriessen**

Part 5: Luce Etterna

After an imperceptible beginning, a musical light develops slowly, interrupted by a brash children’s choir singing a text from the Requiem. Finally Beatrice reappears. She tells that this light is the light of love. If you might think to have experienced or recognised this light during your life, you should know that it’s only a very faint reflection of this celestial light. The sound of a starry sky connects the two female soloists. Cristina sings about the heavenly bodies and the music of the spheres. They are interrupted by Cacciaguida, a cross-breeding of a grumbler and a gangster. He complains about the citizens of Florence. The light of eternity ends the work.

As seen from previous analysis, there is no unity of place between the narratives of the film and the opera (the plot of the film happens in Amsterdam while the plot of the opera score happens in different places, excluding Amsterdam). There is no unity of time between them either (the film plot happens ‘today’ while the plot of the opera score is based in the distant past). The unity of action is non-existent. Furthermore, the principal characters appear both in the film and in the stage events. All of these elements destabilize the integrity of the ‘plot’ in general, and also the identity of the characters. The singing bodies are not visually multiplied, as in *Writing to Vermeer*, and their video recording does not enhance their performance, as was the case in *One*. Nevertheless, it would appear that both of these procedures were reflected partly in the use of singing bodies in *La Commedia*. Each singing body ‘lends’ itself to two narratives simultaneously. It participates live in
Andriessen’s story; however, a mute version of the same body, acting differently, concurrently ‘lives’ another life in Hartley’s film. These two representations constantly interfere, and reflect each other, which puts them both in an estranged, detached, and de-synchronized relationship with the singing voice that they ‘share’.

Towards the Postdramatic Condition of *La Commedia* (2): Deconstructing Characters

The three principal characters of *La Commedia* are Dante, Beatrice and Lucifer. Aside from the fact that they appear in different circumstances in the opera and film, the principal characters also come from different periods of time – the past in Dante’s world, and the present time of Western late capitalist globalized societies (the film happens in Amsterdam; the Dante-journalist comes from Italy). The exponents of contemporary Western society are the characters of the businessman (Lucifer), the journalist (Dante), and the state person (Beatrice).  

For Andriessen, Lucifer is “the fallen angel, in Part III and Cacciaguida, an angry thug with frightening opinions in Part V”, and for Hartley “an angry and resentful businessman with frustrated political ambitions”. For Andriessen, Dante is “at once the famous Italian poet of 14th century Florence on his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven as described in his *Commedia*, as well as a TV News anchor woman reporting on current affairs across Europe”, and for Hartley only a “television news journalist from Italy”. For Andriessen, Beatrice is “Dante’s true love and guide in heaven. But she is also a popular statesperson of some sort”, and for Hartley, she is “a famous foreign public figure visiting Amsterdam”. Thus, all of the principal characters are falsely ‘doubled’ on film. I write ‘falsely doubled’, because although the same actors/singers appear in the film, are dressed similarly, and even have the same names, they are playing different roles. As seen in Andriessen’s commentaries, he acknowledges Hartley’s interpretations of the characters, and keeps them in mind when making his own interpretations. All of the principal characters are therefore deconstructed at the very moment that they are conceived. This ‘unstable’ status of the character affects the relationship between the singing body and the voice.

The fact that Dante, Lucifer and Beatrice appear both as the singing characters of postopera, and also as the mute characters in the film, adds to the estranged relationship between the singing body and the voice: at the same time, the voice appears to belong to the body that sings, and refers to the body of the same actor/singer in the silent film. Moreover, the same voice of Cristina Zavalloni

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330 Besides Beatrice, Dante, Lucifer, and the guild musicians, there are more characters in Hartley’s film: Maria and Lucia – two social activists from the suburbs who come to Amsterdam to hand out pamphlets during a visiting dignitary’s appearance in the city; the bartender and his wife. These, however, are not singing characters, so I will not discuss them on this occasion.

331 Andriessen and Hartley’s synopses of *La Commedia*, manuscript.
is simultaneously attributed to the figure of the male poet Dante (in the score), and the voice of the female journalist (in the film). This situation leads me to perceive the singer on the stage and the same singer on the film as different entities. Seeing both of these figures – singing and mute – ‘distorts’ what I hear in a way that is in line with Connor’s assertions about the vocalic body. The ambivalent position of the voice that refers both to the male and female characters at the same time provokes questions. It makes me think of what the authors wanted to ‘embed’ in such a body-voice-gender relationship. On the other hand, I am interested in what could be ‘read’ from that relationship, which was not the author’s deliberate inscription of the meaning. At this point, it remains to be seen how the mediation of stage events affects singing corporeality in this postopera.

Towards the Postdramatic Condition of La Commedia (3): Mediating Stage Events

It is common practice to include video in contemporary opera, as seen in One, Three Tales, and Writing to Vermeer for instance. However, Hartley’s achievement in La Commedia remains within the medium of film. That black and white film is silent, and it is projected, with short interruptions, during the whole duration of the live performed events on stage. The film is not projected on one screen, but on five of them, one of which is big and serves as the ‘main screen’. The rest of the four screens are activated from time to time, to ‘zoom in’ on particular situations or perspectives presented on the big screen. The fact that film is involved in this opera gives La Commedia an exciting cinematic quality that challenges the operatic listener/spectator’s expectations. The audience is faced with the unusual experience of watching the film in the opera. And the film establishes a non-conventional relation to the music – it is not illustrative, but rather coexists with the music. Two or even three dramaturgies (film, music, staging elements) interlace, and the synchronicity between them is loose. Each one interprets the story based upon Commedia, yet only sometimes do they appear to refer, and then only by coincidence, to the same situation at the same time.

What follows is Hartley’s explanation of the stage events, given in a Brechtian manner – an explanation that acts against theatrical illusion, and seems to serve as a sobering ‘warning’ for those who tend to forget that they are watching an opera:

For the evening, Carré is Purgatory. You will be surprised to discover that in Purgatory the ASKO/Schoenberg Ensemble, conducted by Reinbert de Leeuw, perform the music of Louis Andriessen while Workers go about their business preparing souls for their eventual removal to Paradise. Like any self respecting corporate body, Purgatory has lots of video screens with which to keep an eye on
Human Folly. This evening, their main concern seems to be with a particular two days in Amsterdam (...)\footnote{332}

The workers that Hartley mentions are members of the instrumental ensemble, dressed in grey overalls resembling the typical outfit of construction site workers: an allusion to the working class arises here.\footnote{333} The inclusion of numerous props originating from the construction site in \textit{La Commedia} seems to be an obvious reference: in order to create a new opera, you first have to scrap the old. In this case, video screens influence both what happens on the opera stage, and how the listening spectators perceive the piece. I perceive all of those screens as rather like ‘excavators’ that are used as a means of scrapping the ‘old’ opera by disfiguring its conventional structure and ways of representation.

![Figure 11 - Louis Andriessen, Hal Hartley, La Commedia. Photo © Hans van den Bogaard](image)

A number of small screens that zoom in on situations drawn from the big screen where \textit{La Commedia}’s film is being projected supply the audience with a certain kind of voyeurism that is typically associated with Internet browsing: constantly changing views and small windows that resemble those opened by surfing on the Internet become a kind of ‘default’ for this theatrical-film-opera situation. \textit{La Commedia} requires the listening spectator to experience the film in a scenario

\footnote{332}{Hal Hartley, \textit{La Commedia} - Synopsis, manuscript.}
\footnote{333}{During the earlier days of his career, Andriessen was once photographed at a demolition site prior to the creation of \textit{De Stijl}: “We went off to a demolition site where a few mechanical excavators were still lying around and we were photographed amongst all that junk. It was actually quite appropriate because, in order to write new music you first have to scrap the old”. Louis Andriessen quoted in: Mirjam Zegers (ed.), \textit{The Art of Stealing Time}, Todmorden, Lancs, Arc Music, 2002, p. 217.}
drastically different to that found in the cinema – watching the film within the opera. The audience watches the film when there is no dark cinema hall, the film is silent and the music ensemble is playing live in front of the film screen. There is electronic music involved, singers are singing dressed in costumes, and the conductor leads the orchestra and the choir. Moreover, there are many non-speaking and non-singing actors on stage in a simulated building-site iconography etc. The fact that a black and white film is projected while live music is performed alludes to early cinematic conventions, where silent films were often accompanied by music. This situation is, however, highly problematized since there is no trace of ‘mickey mousing’ – the practice of making music that illustrates the visuals by mimicking the action on stage or in the film.

The relationship between different texts (music, film, staging) resembles the one existing in news television networks. For example, when listening to the news presenter and following the news text on TV, it is possible to read news tickers at the bottom of the screen that have become a ubiquitous part of the television news experience, and to watch at the same time a series of documentary photos or video clips that refer to the event. Hartley transposes this experience to postopera. He plays with mass media structures in *La Commedia* by reflecting news television networks that combine journalism, politics and advertising. The influence of mass media in this postopera, however, is not iconic. The structure of *La Commedia* seems to ‘report’ on the opera, by all available means – music, screens, film, live performance, and subtitle texts appearing on the screen. It becomes the conglomerate of artifacts ‘of the opera’, and that media structure affects the representation of the singing body. In such circumstances, even technical details such as subtitle texts, or monitors that help performers to see the conductor, appear to be embedded in the opera’s self-referential structure.

Telematic cultures, as defined by Vivian Sobchack, are those in which “television, video cassettes, video tape recorder/players, video games and personal computers all form an encompassing electronic system whose various forms ‘interface’ to constitute an alternative and absolute world that uniquely incorporates the spectator/user in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied state”.

*La Commedia* reinvented in postopera the world of telematic cultures that Sobchack was writing about through complex live performed and projected situations. All of these situations that are mediated imply that the relationship between the body and the voice is mediated also, and that mediation affects the immediacy of that relation making it asynchronous and ‘artificial’. Narratives that are multiplied, characters that are deconstructed, and

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334 The composer of electronic music for *La Commedia* is Anke Brouwer.
stage events that are mediated make the vocalic body of *La Commedia* singing characters complex, and the relationship between the body and the voice on stage to be detached.

Through multiplying narratives, deconstructing characters and mediating stage events, Hartley and Andriessen show that perhaps the only possible resolution of the long-lasting operatic ‘battle’ for domination between different texts is to expose de-synchronicities and to insist upon them. Those three procedures influence the relationship between the singing bodies and the voices. The fact that there are different plots in the film and on the opera stage, and that both of those plots are reflected through each singing character, makes the position of the characters ambivalent. When they sing, they sing both ‘for’ live performing bodies on stage, and also in a way ‘for’ projected bodies of the same singers on the film. One voice refers to different situations of the same body at the same time. This ambivalent relationship between bodies and voices is to some extent the product of deconstructed operatic characters as well, but that relationship also deconstructs the characters simultaneously. The manner in which stage events are mediated makes an ambivalent relationship between singing bodies and sung voices on stage even more complex. The body-voice relationship is already ambivalent and destabilized due to multiplying narratives and deconstructing characters. In addition, the numerous video screens that ‘zoom’ in on particular details shifts attention further from the live body that sings on stage, to the representations of the same body projected on different screens.

In the midst of all the redefinitions that the operatic character goes through in *La Commedia*, yet another one takes place – a vocal travesty of the Dante character, where Cristina Zavalloni’s singing refers to two characters and two genders at the same time, paradoxically both played by her, but in different media – film and opera. The fact that I can never know if the singing Dante addresses the audience as a male or female affects the perception of the voice that fluctuates between the female and the male gender. In what follows, I will first analyze the vocalic body of the character of Dante, and then confront it with Dame’s theory in order to investigate how the relationship between body, voice and gender is reinvented in this piece.
One Voice, Two Characters, Two Genders

“In early opera”, Dame explains, “voices were chosen for their beauty, their potential, their virtuosity, and not for their gender”. But, what we choose as beauty is gendered. Therefore, despite the fact that Andriessen seems to choose vocals for La Commedia only for the ‘beauty’ of the voices and not for their gender, the way that the criterion of ‘vocal beauty’ is constructed is already gendered. Andriessen is fascinated by strong, expressive, non-vibrato, and mostly by female voices that are capable of eradicating the borders between different musical languages, strategies and contexts.

Unique timbre preferences are confirmed by Andriessen’s choice of the voices in La Commedia, especially regarding the voice of Cristina Zavalloni, a singer whose background is both in jazz and classical music repertoire. The specific strength and intensity of Zavalloni’s voice, and a timbre that is much closer to jazz vocalists than to conventional opera singers, appeals to Andriessen’s vocal aesthetics:

There are opera singers, oratorio singers, rock ‘n’ roll singers, pop singers, actors, and between all these tiny ‘provinces’ are huge barriers. I will devote the last twenty years of my life to demolish them (...) It is necessary in order to develop the new singing style which we need.

Andriessen’s statement above confirms the importance of the vocal expression in his music.

According to the score of La Commedia, the situation in connection with the relation between the voice of Christina Zavalloni and the roles she interprets is complex. In Part 1, Zavalloni sings as Dante, in Part 2 she sings only as a “voice solo”, in Part 4 she sings as both Dante and

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338 Some of the singers with whom Andriessen closely collaborated, or whose work he highly respects, are Cathy Barberian, Astrid Seriese, Barbara Hannigan, Marie Angel, Iva Bitova, Cristina Zavalloni. He shows much less interest in male voices, and does not use them as often as female voices. He collaborated with Jeroen Willems both in his opera Inanna and in La Commedia.
339 Zavalloni was already for some time Andriessen’s ‘vocal muse’. Some of the important recent pieces of music theatre and vocal-instrumental music were either dedicated to her, or feature her in the main roles, for example small-scale postoperas Inanna (2003) and Anais Nin (2010).
“Cristina”, and in Part 5 she is only “Cristina”.

During the entire opera, her outfit does not change, so she could demonstrate differences between the characters that she ‘comments’ or ‘personifies’ only by her voice, if required. As a reminder, the character of Dante is both male poet and female journalist at the same time. Zavalloni is dressed in woman’s clothes and sings with a high voice, making no effort to appear as a male. It is symptomatic that the composer never used the term ‘soprano’ in the score. Andriessen undermines the stereotypical typology of operatic voices. With a background in various kinds of ‘non-classical’ music, Zavalloni’s voice hardly matches the conventional ‘soprano’ voice type that bears the burden of the classical music tradition.

Although it might appear so at first glance, the male side of the character of Dante is not meant to be only nominal. This is supported by the fact that Andriessen refers to the particular historical figure of the male poet, Dante. Also, in some parts of the text, a heterosexual love relationship is assumed, since it is obvious that Dante as a male sings love song to Beatrice (“Sorella mia, sposa” (...), from Part IV). But, for listening spectators who presumably do not have previous knowledge of Dante the poet, and his Commedia, the character of Dante in La Commedia would be perceived as a female because Cristina Zavalloni sings it. Only after acquiring knowledge about the context of the piece, will the recipient be able to perceive the Dante character as a male, as well.

In the synopsis of La Commedia, Andriessen states that Cristina (Zavalloni) is the ‘personification of Dante’, and this specific metaphorical relationship between the singer and the character opens the space for a reinvention of the body-voice-gender relationship in the case of the Dante character. To some extent, placing himself in relation to what he previously said on personification, Andriessen states on another occasion: “Rather than personifying the roles of Dante and Lucifer, those two singers function more as commentators.” So, the singers are both personifications and commentators, and that allows a non-mimetic relation between the singer/actor and the role s/he interprets. That situation also opens a space for playing with the ambiguity of the singer’s gender. What eventually occurs is the problematization of the body-voice-gender relationship that allows a parallel to Dame’s interrogation of gendered position of voice types to be discussed. Another level of meanings could be read from the unconventional pairing of what is conventionally considered as the female voice with the male character, in relation to similar

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341 Unlike in the score of La Commedia, the program booklet of the performance always designates ‘voice’ and ‘Cristina’ as ‘Dante’.

situations from the history of opera, where examples of women singing as men, and vice versa, were not rare.³⁴³

A non-mimetic approach featured by music is important for this discussion. The music of *La Commedia* has an oratorio-like dramaturgy. Characters do not have dialogues. Their monologues are ecstatic and exciting thanks both to their unusual vocal powers and the different stylistic materials used. I would not argue that music ‘takes over’ in this opera, although it was meant to do so.³⁴⁴ The stage and film presence are so remarkable that they strongly and constantly divert the listening spectator’s attention away from the musical dramaturgy. In *La Commedia*, there is no invisibility of the ensemble. The orchestra was not in the pit, as there was no pit. The ensemble was visible, lighted, and in front of the stage. There is no darkening of the hall. Any possibility of hiding the music emitter was corrupted. As in *Writing to Vermeer*, the music does not accompany what happens on stage. Here, music does not reflect what happens on the screen; it is rather the opposite — the film accompanies the music. Furthermore, there is no “atemporal nonlocalized present” (Žižek) from which music would come.³⁴⁵ The musical performance is ‘staged’ in front of the stage. Andriessen and Hartley’s approach is highly anti-illusionist: at every moment the piece, the system of functioning of the piece is exposed, and its mechanisms are ironically bold. Instead of a Wagnerian synthesis of the arts, *La Commedia* brings together a multitude of coexisting texts. The anti-illusionist approach mirrors the relationship between the body and the voice as well, and influences the relationship between the voice and gender in the case of the character of Dante.

³⁴³ Naomi André traces the genealogy of interrogating the gender of the voice in opera history, and these are some of the questions she discusses: “(...) As the aural legacy of the castrati haunts the beginning of the nineteenth century in the travesti heroes, so the travesti roles then cast their shadow throughout the rest of the century and inform the female characters that emerge over the course of the nineteenth century. Since the voice of the second woman used to be heard as that of a man, how can her voice not present a different articulation of femininity in opera than that of the first woman? (...) This study explores the meaning of this aural genealogy; how a woman’s voice represents both male and female characters and the relationship between voice and gender signification”. André, Op. Cit. p. 12.

³⁴⁴ Hartley explains the need to leave the film-opera story ambivalent as necessary for the situation in which the music could lead in the process of meaning making: “How do you create this intriguing environment where the music can take over and make us all feel something big, where the music fuses all these other elements together? So far I’ve found it has to do with not being too specific. Characters and situations, in the movie as well as on stage, have to be only implied, not spelt out too exactly. Recognizable but general. I guess I’m hoping to create the circumstances for some sort of flood of associations that are meaningful but hard to state explicitly. That’s a long way out from what I usually do as a filmmaker. Here, the meaning is the music”. See: Anders Wright, „The Second Decade“, [http://www.possiblefilms.com/articles.htm](http://www.possiblefilms.com/articles.htm), Accessed: November 22, 2011.

Dante: Singing beyond Body

Parts 2 and 4 are particularly interesting in relation to the analysis of the Dante character’s vocalic body. In both of these parts, we see Cristina Zavalloni at some moments singing on the opera stage, while appearing concurrently on Hartley’s black and white film, filmed on the staircase of what appears to be the foyer of De Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam. She appears as a kind of silent singing-talking head, and it is immediately obvious that what she sang for the film is not compatible with her simultaneous singing live on stage. She is de-synchronized. With reference to Abbate’s argument, Zavalloni as Dante objectifies us with her voice, but she cannot be objectified by our gaze, as Abbate proposed. 

This is because our attention as listening spectators is constantly diverted between what we hear as a female voice, what we see as a female singing figure, what it was suggested by authors we should perceive to be simultaneously a male and female character, and what we perceive as de-synchronization between all of these elements. Both Beatrice and Dante are female, and although they never sing in duet, the fact that Dante’s Commedia represents them as an ideal of heterosexual love, makes me to hear a homoerotic dimension between those voices in La Commedia.

Joke Dame examines the casting women in leading opera roles by way of homoerotics: “The casting of women in the leading parts is the contemporary counterpart of the historical baroque

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performance where the homoerotics of the castrati have been displaced by lesbian erotics”. She elaborates on this issue:

Thus the audience in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who did not, as we do, automatically associate high-pitched voices with women only, were confronted with men who sang their love for each other in similar registers, regardless of the gender ascribed to them by the libretto. In this way some baroque operas gave rise to what might be called aural homosexuality – a kind of Barthesian *jouissance de l’écoute*.

Dame opens her text about sexual difference and the castrato by recollecting her first confrontation with a high male voice, countertenor, which she did not recognize as man’s voice at a time. She explains:

As far as I knew, vocal tones above a certain frequency were women’s voices. There were basses and tenors and these were men. Women and children were altos and sopranos. When I heard the countertenor, or male alto, I was at loss. Gender confusion tends to make one nervous.

The ‘gender trouble’ Dame experienced in relation to what is conventionally perceived as a female voice produced by a male body is the intriguing issue she discusses in her text. Relying on Butlerian conclusions that sex and gender are both cultural constructs rather than products of nature, Dame applies this to the gender-voice concept within the context of opera. She does this with particular attention to castrato singers that themselves exemplify the vocalic-body ‘gender trouble’, reconfiguring the conventional ways by which sex, gender and voice relate to each other.

“Does the voice have a gender?” asks Dame, and she continues:

“One is inclined to say that it does. After all, in most cases we do hear correctly whether a voice comes from a female or a male body. Nonetheless, pop music provides crafty examples of gender-disguised singing. Equally in Western art music and non-Western music there are examples that might give rise to doubts as to the ‘genderedness’ of the voice”.

I agree with Dame’s view regarding what she calls “gender-disguised singing” in pop music. Laurie Anderson is an intriguing example of it and the case of Anderson’s *Homeland* will be examined in the

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348 Ibid., p. 147.
349 Ibid., p. 139.
350 With the term ‘gender trouble’ I refer to the acclaimed book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) by Judith Butler whose main argument is that both sex and gender are performative cultural constructs, and that they are not given by ‘nature’.
next chapter. The point where I disagree with Dame is her statement that there are examples that “give rise to doubts as to the ‘genderedness’ of the voice”. Dame’s assertion at first leads me to believe that she implies that the voice is not gendered. Further in the text, however, she admits that there is no space for claiming that the voice is not gendered, but that the category of gender-sex is reinvented along with the reinvention of the genderedness of the voice. I do not doubt if the voice is gendered, but I question rather how the voice-gender construct is reinvented in light of various reinventions of sex-gender constructs.

Dame quotes feminist theory as a departure point for her discussion, and asserts “that gender is constructed, and femininity and masculinity are neither natural nor unalterable, but rather socioculturally and historically determined categories, and therefore subject to change”. When applying the previous to the relation between sex, gender and voice, she concludes that: “Both the denaturalization of sexual difference and the denaturalization of voice difference make it in their own ways possible to sever the link between sex, voice pitch, and timbre”. As sexes are pluralized, the gender of the voice is pluralized, too. And the fact that we cannot easily decide which gender we hear through the voice, as in the case of castrato singer, is not a sign of genderedness, but of the reinvention of the voice-gender relation.

Dame criticizes a need “to categorize a voice according to gender, to assign a sex to the voice” and consequently suggests “that voice categories (soprano, alto and so on) are not sexually fixed categories but prone to choice as well”. Commenting upon Barthes’s reading of Balzac’s novella Sarrasine—one of whose main characters is the castrato, Zambinella—she points out that “having the phallus, or being the phallus, not having the phallus or not being the phallus, are all positions that can be taken by both men and women”. Such a conclusion does not deny gender, but suggests that the strict division between male and female is questionable and that there are more genders than two. She then puts the reinvention of the body-voice construct within an operatic context.

The ‘experiment’ with the character of Dante could also be read as a kind of reflection on opera’s early days and on the authenticity of its performing practice today. While analyzing the cultural history of the castrato, Dame arrives at the question “Who is to perform the role of the

352 Ibid.
353 Ibid.
354 Ibid., p. 139.
355 Ibid., p. 140.
356 Ibid., p. 141.
357 It has been suggested that authors of Florentine Camerata who created the first opera Dafne in 1597 or 98 (composer Jacopo Peri, librettist Ottavio Rinuccini) were also using the text of Dante’s Commedia in their attempts to re-create Greek tragedy. Gordan Dragović, Leksikon opera, Beograd, Univerzitet umetnosti, 2008.
castrato in modern revivals?"358 La Commedia appears as Andriessen wanted to tackle similar issues in relation to Baroque opera today. Dame develops a discussion on castrato roles today in connection to the gender of the voice. Since the castrato singers ceased to exist she is interested in how vocal parts written for castratos are interpreted in contemporary revivals of Baroque opera “whereby gender and voice is put into action as stylistic option, as choice”.359 The relationship between the gender and the voice, freed from stereotypes and open to uncommon choices, is of special interest to Dame, and to Andriessen in La Commedia as well.

With Dante character, Andriessen and Hartley confirm Dame’s claims in her theory that voice and gender should be a ‘stylistic option’, rather than a convention. Andriessen and Hartley showed what André designated as “vocal timbre crossings (...) where the performance of sound traverses gender”.360 The voice of Cristina Zavalloni, although sung by female singer, and although sounding as what is conventionally understood to be a female voice, becomes a signifier, a material part of the sign. The signified for that signifier is ambivalent and fluctuating, due to all the dramaturgical and media procedures involved in the piece. The status of the singing body of Dante becomes a place that relativizes many conventions imposed over operatic character in the Western operatic tradition. That singing body becomes a ‘knot’ through which different entities are tied and/or desynchronized – body and voice, music and film, gender and sex.

With regard to Andriessen’s earlier operas and the approaches towards women characters within them, it is not surprising that the position of the woman on the opera stage is also questioned in this piece. The notion of a female taking the role of Dante erases binary oppositions between the genders in opera, together with our perception of them. It shows that gender-voice relationship should be perceived as performance. The singing Dante character, enlightened by the theories of Dame, enacts the relationship between gender and voice as a performance, and not as something pre-determined by nature. By ‘pronouncing’ Dante to be female and male, Andriessen also throws an ironical arrow towards the conventional position of women in opera. The undoing of women in this case becomes additionally the undoing of man on the opera stage.361 The female voice, suggested to be the male voice at the same time by a decision of the artist, is directed ‘beyond’ the body that produces it.

359 Ibid., p. 140.
361 I refer here to a book by Catherine Clement, Opera; or, The Undoing of Women, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. In it, Clement reads the opera as a text about female oppression and male power. She supports her reading by the examples of famous operas in which women are either murdered or driven to suicide by men.