Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera
Novak, J.

Citation for published version (APA):
Novak, J. (2012). Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 7

Vocal Drag, Counter-Castrato and the Scandal of the Singing Body

In Laurie Anderson’s Homeland, for which she acted as multiple author – she wrote the lyrics, composed the music, produced the album, played several instruments on it, and sang/talked either as herself, or as her male alter ego Fenway Bergamot - the relationship between the singing body, the voice and gender carries different implications from those analyzed in La Commedia.  

The voice of Zavalloni in La Commedia is at the same time assigned to the man and to the woman character. That voice fluctuates between genders, and the vocal binary opposition between the genders is questioned. The gender-voice relationship is perceived as a performance. With the help of the harmonizer, Anderson invents what is conventionally considered a masculine vocal; she puts on ‘vocal drag’ and at the same time assumes a masculine identity to ‘fit’ the voice. She relies on the fact that the gender-voice relationship is performative, too. With her male alter-ego, Fenway Bergamot, she insists on a binary opposition between the voice and the gender, but only to treat it ironically and to problematize what interests her in a number of her projects: the avoidance of stereotypical roles of a woman on stage. And that stage, in Anderson’s case, is one that crosses different disciplines and genres, as she enacts the figure of the rock musician and singer, the classical music violinist, the performance artist and the multimedia artist.

In this chapter I discuss how in Homeland Anderson problematizes the body-voice-gender relationship, focusing on the figure of her male alter-ego Bergamot. Homeland shares the history of vocal drag with other pieces by the same author. In order to trace the ‘origins’ of Bergamot I first present a ‘history of vocal drag’ that spans a large part of Anderson’s career. The history they share, and Anderson’s discussions of it, contribute to an understanding of why and how she uses vocal drag in Homeland. After presenting the history of vocal drag in Anderson’s opus I place the figure of Bergamot in the context of discussions about castrato singers by Filipa Lã and Jane W. Davidson, Michel Poizat and Adriana Cavarero. I discuss how castrato singers expose the relationship between the body, voice and gender, and also how they undermine the conventional voice-gender construct.

---

362 The album Homeland was published on CD and DVD in 2010 by Nonesuch Records, and before that, during 2007-2009, it toured in a series of live performances. I attended one of these performances in Lisbon in 2007.

363 Anderson’s musical language in Homeland is eclectic, too, borrowing from minimal electronic, techno, world music and jazz. The ensemble Anderson has chosen to accompany her in performing Homeland consists of musicians engaged in New York’s experimental jazz and rock scenes. The members of the ensemble, as credited on Nonesuch CD/DVD, are: Laurie Anderson (vocals, keyboards, percussion, violin and radio), Eyvind Kang (viola), Peter Scherer (keyboards), Igor Koshkendey (Mongoun-Ool Ondar, igil), Aidysmaa Koshkendey (vocals), Rob Burger (keyboards, orchestrion, accordion, marxophone), Lou Reed (additional percussion, guitar), Antony (vocals, background vocals), Shahzad Ismaily (percussion), Omar Hakim (drums), Kieran Hebden (keyboards), Ben Witman (percussion and drums), Skuli Sverrisson (bass guitar, guitar, bass) and John Zorn (saxophone).
how the body–voice–gender construct is reinvented in case of Bergamot, whom I understand as a kind of counter-castrato figure.

Finally, I confront Homeland with the text “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body” by Michelle Duncan.\textsuperscript{364} Duncan argues that the singing voice of opera is corporeal and ‘scandalous’, borrowing the concept of the scandal of the body from Shoshana Felman.\textsuperscript{365} I illuminate Homeland with Duncan’s claims concerning the performativity of the voice based on her critique of Felman and Judith Butler in order to see how the body ‘temper’ and ‘tamper’ with the singing and speech act of Laurie Anderson, and what happens with body-voice-gender construct when vocal drag takes place.

Homeland contains eleven songs and one instrumental.\textsuperscript{366} Texts of the songs tackle issues such as US foreign policy, economic collapse, the erosion of personal freedom, control and security in contemporary United States. Homeland consists of a dramatic monologue spoken by Anderson herself and by Fenway Bergamot. Those two, however, do not carry on a dialogue. The text is beyond dramatic principles in a conventional sense: there is no conventional plot, but all the fragmented ‘stories’ that are told constitute a kaleidoscopic ‘portrait’ of life in America today. The way the musical ‘text’ is created and performed is not structured by a sung dramatic text, and this is to some extent due to the unusual way the album was produced.\textsuperscript{367}

Homeland is an example of both Anderson’s problematization of the body-voice-gender relation, and her ongoing critique of contemporary US society. The character of Fenway Bergamot is the site in which both of those strategies meet. The name of the piece is Anderson’s ironic comment


\textsuperscript{365} The explanation of what Shoshana Felman understands by the term ‘scandal’ could be found in her own words about J. L. Austin’s theory: “I had better declare at once that I am seduced by Austin. I like not only the openness that I find in his theory, but the theory’s potential for scandal; I like not only what he says, but what he “does with words”. Doing with words, their performative potential, is what Felman calls scandal. Felman in: Stanley Cavell, “Foreword to the Scandal of the Speaking Body”, Shoshana Felman, The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. vii.


\textsuperscript{367} During the time Anderson toured around the world with Homeland, she gathered recordings of live performances of the piece. Afterwards, in the studio, she created the Homeland album using recorded materials and incorporating them in the album so that final musical result is a carefully assembled collage of existing materials. She often used, for example, some melodic phrase, cut it from recording and ‘glued’ it in final product. According to her own words, she “constructed songs”. She assembled together instrumental parts/fragments of the same material that was recorded in different places, so that the playing of people who sometimes never even met sounds together on the recording in the same song. That way she made Homeland a documentary about itself. The collage methodology, however, is not identifiable to the common listener, since the work was produced with cutting edge technology that have made ‘the edges’ between the assembled parts smooth. See: “Laurie Anderson on the Making of Homeland”, video, http://www.nonesuch.com/media/videos/laurie-anderson-on-the-making-of-homeland Accessed: February 25, 2011.
on her country in which ‘homeland security’ is the outstanding strategy of the state. She implies with melancholy that ‘homeland’ is a metaphor for a secure, warm place that does not exist for United States citizens: “(...) it’s a fuzzy word that Americans don’t use. You know, it’s kind of—sounds a little like ‘fatherland’ or sounds kind of German, (...) So, pairing it with a bureaucratic word, it rhymes with, of course, “security” in - to the American ear. You don’t just say ‘homeland’. The next word is ‘security’”. In one of the interviews Anderson also underlines that the piece is about the feeling of loss: “I realized it was when we invaded Iraq and that what I had lost was my country”. She made her texts in Homeland deal critically with political aspects of life in United States of America, and by this means the piece gains an activist/political dimension.

Technology makes it possible to perform in vocal drag, and this plays an important role in Homeland and in my reading of it. As in many of her previous works, Anderson involves technology in composition and performance: “(...) in Laurie Anderson’s performances, one actually gets to watch her produce the sounds we hear. But her presence is always already multiply mediated: we hear her voice only as it is filtered through Vocoder, as it passes through reiterative loops, as it is layered upon itself by means of sequencers”. The singing style Anderson uses in Homeland relies on melodies whose range is small, and often the singing appears as little more than overemphasized speaking. Anderson’s voice is often doubled with the ‘shadow’ of the voice filters or with the violin sound. Sometimes the violin ‘speaks’, imitating the inflection of speech.

Only in track number 7 – Another Day in America – is there no singing. Fenway Bergamot speaks. That speech is slow and expressive, accompanied by the music of the ensemble (and at some points female, and at the end of track number 7 a male singing voice is reproduced simultaneously from the loudspeakers in the background). In the rest of the parts, Anderson sings with her ‘natural’ voice. In Another Day in America she appropriates a man’s voice with the aid of the harmonizer, and talks with it, using it as a kind of vocal mask. I will now provide an overview of how she gradually came to that standpoint. I look for motives that made her transform her own voice, and also for the reasons she uses vocal drag for.

A History of Being in Vocal Drag: From Voice of Authority to Gender Fiction

Andersson’s interest in the performativity of the voice goes back to beginnings of her career and her fascination with the Beat-generation writers. She was impressed by the work and also the voice of William S. Burroughs, whom she met for the first time at the Nova Convention, a three-day celebration of his work in New York in 1978. He influenced Anderson by insisting on interrogating the moral values of US society.\textsuperscript{371} She also remembers the Nova Convention as her first attempt to wear a man’s voice: “The Nova Convention was the first time I used the Harmonizer to alter my voice. This is a digital filter that I tuned to drop the pitch of my voice so that I sounded like a man. I called it ‘The Voice of Authority’ and used it in many performances when I wanted another edge. It was an audio mask and being in drag was thrilling”.\textsuperscript{372}

In 1986 Anderson’s ‘relationship’ with her alter ego outgrew the vocal means. She made the work \textit{The Clone} in which she explored dramatic tension between her appearance as Laurie Anderson, and as a man, but this time not only by audio means, but also by video:

I was working with a filter that lowered my voice to that of a man. It was an audio mask and I really enjoyed this way of being in drag through sound. One day I thought “I wonder what this guy looks like?” So I cloned myself in video with an ADO filter, added a mustache, and came up with my alter ego – a guy who is three feet tall with size one shoes, quite insecure, as clones no doubt usually are. Through split screen, we did several videos “What You Mean We?” 1986 and “KTCA Artist Intros” 1987.\textsuperscript{373}

After that, Anderson started appearing regularly in drag and with a man’s voice. For example, the lyrics of the song “The Cultural Ambassador” from her 1995 album “The Ugly One with the Jewels and Other Stories: A Reading from Stories from the Nerve Bible” describe Anderson’s encounters with custom officers and security guards on the airports when she was travelling at the time of Gulf war, often being forced to explain the purpose of the electronic equipment she was bringing for her concerts: voice filters, among others. Through the lyrics spoken by a man’s voice, Anderson offers an explanation of the necessity of using a man’s voice as her own:

And I’d pull out something like this filter and say:

— Now this is what I’d like to think of as the voice of Authority.
And it would take me a while to tell them how I used it for songs that were, you know, about various forms of control, and they would say:
— Now, why would you want to talk like that?

\textsuperscript{371} Laurie Anderson, \textit{The Record of Time, Sound in the Work of Laurie Anderson}, Lyon, Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, 2002, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., p. 93.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., p. 83.
And I’d look around at the SWAT teams and the undercover agents and the dogs and the radio in the corner, tuned to the Superbowl coverage of the war. And I’d say:
— Take a wild guess.374

In Homeland Anderson’s male alter ego becomes increasingly important, becoming an ‘official’ identity - Fenway Bergamot - and even it exits the realm of Anderson’s performances and starts to lead ‘his own’ public life. Bergamot’s photograph appears on the cover of the Homeland CD/DVD; Bergamot talks publicly about Homeland; and Anderson even establishes a Facebook profile of this character, posting on it clips showing him engaged in a campaign of promoting her record and shows, reporting from around the world on Anderson’s performances, or negotiating with her publisher.375 Although Bergamot is abundantly present in promoting the Homeland album, in the live performance of Homeland I saw in Lisbon Anderson was not masked as Bergamot, though she did exhibit the vocal mask. Her visual appearance, however, was deprived of the conventional attributes of feminine singers/performers. She was without makeup, short haired, and dressed in trousers. The only visible sign of conventional femininity were her hanging earrings.

Due to a bit of a clumsy appearance, Bergamot on video could appear as a benign and naive character. Beneath this appearance, however, is concealed a social critic. In a short video featuring Bergamot in Paris ‘he’ explains the origin of his surname, connecting it to Marcel Proust’s novel À la Recherche du Temps Perdu, in which the fruit bergamot is described as a memory trigger. “Fenway is a character from Proust in a way. I didn't know this when Lou [Reed, Anderson’s husband] thought up the name but Bergamot is apparently a kind of fruit that’s one of the memory-jiggering devices in Proust - but that’s good because Fenway is into memory in a lot of ways. So many of the songs are about memory.”376 Bergamot might help people to remember what they were encouraged to forget. This is what Anderson does with Homeland: inter alia, she reminds people of the state they could have forgotten or lost. Lyrics from Homeland n. 7 quoted below are an example of that reminding:

Yeah, some were sad to see those days disappear.
The flea markets and their smells, the war.
All the old belongings strewn out on the sidewalks.
Mildewed clothes and old resentments and ragged record jackets.377

---

377 Lyrics from “Another Day in America”, Homeland n. 7
Besides evoking the feeling of loss, when asked about what exactly the character of Fenway Bergamot allows her to do that she couldn’t do in her own voice, Anderson reveals that it is her way of tweaking oppressive people, and in the case of Homeland I would add, the oppressive state, too:

That voice started out as the voice of a pompous windbag. It was fun to tweak people who are always telling you what to do. Every time it came out of the box every few years, I would use that voice again. This time when it came out, it was meandering and melancholic, and I thought it was interesting. So that’s what it allowed me to do—to talk in a way that if I did it in my own voice, you’d be like, whoa, you’re losing the thread. But there’s something about that monotone with a little bit of oddness and quirkiness and some keyboard paths beneath it. It allows for mental drift, and I’d love to have people just move through that world and let their minds go that way.378

Having in mind this development of vocal drag in Anderson’s oeuvre, culminating in Homeland, I looked further for a closer and more direct explanation of its purpose and found it in Anderson’s own words: “I wear audio masks in my work – meaning, electronically, I can be this shoe salesman, or this demented cop, or some other character. And I do that to avoid the expectations of what it means to be a woman on a stage”.379 The avoidance of stereotypical situations related to the status and function of the woman composer and performer is a constant in Anderson’s oeuvre. She questions the identity of the female composer/performer both vocally and with her physical presence. In Homeland this questioning is, as it was previously in her United States cycle, brought into a close relation to cultural practices and power relations in the United States of America, where she lives.

Anderson explicitly points to male-female relations a couple of times in the texts, for example:

(...)
When the doctor says: congratulations, it’s a boy!
Where do all the dream baby girls, those possible pearls, go?
Lorraine and Susan with the brown eyes
And lovely Irene and difficult but beautiful Betty
And tiny tiny Juanita?
They’re sailing through this transitory life.
They’re moving through this transitory life.
(...)

The texts of the songs are both critical towards America and melancholy about it, and they are melancholy too in terms of questioning the status of woman in the context of a dominant discourse of man’s power in the world of music and beyond it. Anderson uses her visual appearance as a tool for critique, too. She adds a mustache, over-emphasized eyebrows, and dresses in a man suit. Still, she stays recognizable as female, because the mimesis she creates is purposely grotesque; it exhibits signs of masculinity, but seemingly only to treat them ironically.

Susan McClary wrote about how Anderson displays her femininity in the United States cycle by noting that the androgynous look Anderson takes “downplays her sexuality, which, given the terms of the tradition, always threatens to become the whole show”. The tradition McClary mentions is the one related to the male heterosexual gaze that objectifies the woman. She does not discuss Anderson’s strategy from another perspective through which her sexuality might not look so downplayed.

Anderson shows through the Bergamot character how identity is bound to gender and sexuality. She seems to demonstrate how to read ‘gender fiction’, as Judith Halberstam would call it. “Creating gender as fiction demands that we learn how to read it. In order to find our way into a

---

posttranssexual era, we must educate ourselves as readers of gender fiction, we must learn how to take pleasure in gender and how to become an audience for the multiple performances of gender we witness everyday”. The Bergamot character shows that gender is performed by the voice, too. The performativity of Bergamot’s voice arises from the clash between the male and female genders. In what follows I will briefly compare the figure of the castrato singer, also based on a confrontation between the genders, with what Anderson does using the Bergamot character.

Living Backwards: Counter-Castrato

Quoting Kierkegaard in Homeland’s Another Day in America, Anderson makes an effort to understand the world, and announces that the world could only be understood “when lived backwards”. I understand that alternative not only as a trajectory from the end to the beginning, but also as something seen from a different, possibly opposite perspective. And that different perspective, ‘the other side’, as I see it in case of Anderson, assumes the standpoint of a woman instead of that of a man. The figure of ‘countercastrato’, a female performer with a masculine voice, is part of that understanding ‘from the other side’, and could be seen as the result of the history of vocal drag in Anderson’s pieces. More broadly, the whole of Homeland could be read from this ‘backwards position’ of Fenway Bergamot.

The figure of the baroque castrato singer imposes itself on this discussion of the body - voice relation in Homeland because the castrato explicitly interrogates the relationship between the gender and the voice in opera, emphasizing the concept of a constructed relation between the body, the voice and gender. The sex of the castrato singer is masculine, but the voice resignifies the conventional vocal representation of both female and male gender. The castrato in opera was a female-looking male with a feminine voice, and Anderson, when in the drag of Bergamot, is a male-looking female with a caricature of a masculine voice. In both cases, the vocalic body is explicit and spectacular.

384 Filipa Lã and Jane W. Davidson sum up historical and anatomical features of these unusual singers: “The first written evidence of a strong connection between sexual hormones and voice quality dates back to the 3rd century BC, when castration was reported as a way of preserving a boy’s high vocal range for singing purposes beyond puberty. Experiments with castration spread to all of Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries, especially to Spain and to Italy, and by the 16th century the Church became the greatest promoter of the castrato voice. A castrato had a crystalline timbre and an exceptional range, and his voice was extremely powerful. Castrati developed a reputation as skilful singers, able to sing the majority of operatic roles of their time, despite the fact that they were originally vocally altered in order to sing sacred music in churches. Their voice characteristics were a consequence of a paediatric laryngeal structure, vibrating in a female register, but having the breathing power and resonance of a man”. See: Filipa Lã and Jane W. Davidson, “Investigating The Relationship Between Sexual Hormones And Female Western Classical Singing”, Research Studies in Music Education, 2005, vol. 24, p. 75.
It was not uncommon in operatic history for male characters to be sung by female singers, and vice versa. Cavarero goes back to the beginnings of opera, remembering that women were prohibited from being on stage, while castrato singers were used for interpreting female characters. But, even after that prohibition, castrati remained, and they continued dominating stages until the middle of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. That fact says much about the practice of vocal travesty in opera. Paying her attention to transvestitism in opera, Cavarero concludes: “(...) transvestitism is one of the typical features of melodrama. Opera has an irresistible tendency to stage drag: women who dress like men, and men who dress like women.”\textsuperscript{385} She underlines that “transvestitism is an essential element in the historical emergence of operatic melodrama – not only because men put on women’s clothes within the plot of the story, but also because of a more austere ‘vocal transvestitism in the strict sense,’”\textsuperscript{386} alluding to castrato singers.

Michel Poizat stresses that the castrato voice is “detached from its usual functions of signification, communication, and the marking of gender difference.”\textsuperscript{387} I would not agree that it is detached from the marking of gender difference; I would argue instead that it undermines the conventional voice-gender relationship and our ways of seeing it. While I listen to Anderson’s ‘male’ voice in \textit{Homeland} I am aware that Laurie Anderson produces it, and I keep listening to its sound. Only after hearing the sound of the voice do I attach the meaning of the text to it. “The use of the castrato pointed away from the ordinary meanings of the voice, which lie in the message, and directed the listening ear to the particularities of the voice itself (...) Because this sound was a strange voice in the wrong body (insofar as it belonged to any natural body), it became impersonal, more a musical instrument than a voice at all.”\textsuperscript{388} Although the vocal drag of Anderson gained an identity, the voice of Fenway remains somewhat impersonal, too. Fenway’s impersonality, however, mostly originates from its machine-like voice. That voice is ventriloquial, ‘inhuman’, and electronically generated. As in the case of \textit{Three Tales}, it assumes a kind of monstrosity.

Anderson’s voice in \textit{Another Day in America} was transformed into an artificial man’s voice similar to the non-human voices sometimes heard in films or cartoons. Her androgynous look, seeming to question her gender identity, is supported by this vocal travesty. From the question her outlook posed – ‘Which gender would you attach to me?’ – the focus moved to the question, ‘How can a woman’s body produce a man’s voice?’ And the answer is to be found in a harmonizer capable

\textsuperscript{386} Ibid.
of manipulating vocal abilities to the point where the gender of the voice is presented as a performance, and the power of the male voice as a caricature.

**The Scandal of the Singing Body**

While elaborating the performativity of the body and voice in opera in the text “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body”, Michelle Duncan unexpectedly introduces a digression about a film that tells the story of a family of nomadic shepherds in the Gobi desert and their troubles with a mother camel who refuses to take care of her calf after a long and difficult birth. After the hungered and exhausted calf had reached the critical stage, a local musician helped with the healing ritual. The mother camel received a ‘treatment’: a melody played on violin and sung by the female voice. After first protesting, the mother camel, “moved by the sound of a voice” was happily reunited with her calf.

Although at first the digression about the camels in Duncan’s text might look like an awkward fit, it actually conveniently serves to transpose the problem of the performativity and materiality of the voice out of the field of opera, to analyze it there, and then to bring it back, verifying and applying the results of analysis to the opera world. Duncan is particularly interested in the performativity of the voice and the singing body in opera. She warns that the singing body should be considered when the meaning of opera is analyzed, and explains its absence from pedigreed discourses by pointing to the stereotypical delineation between perceiving opera and perceiving ritual, suggesting that “opera is pegged as an (‘enlightened’) art form with metaphysical properties that transcend the body, whereas ritual is a bodily (and thus ‘uncivilised’) cultural practice.” Duncan urges that we examine opera as a corporeal cultural practice.

Reflecting on the philosopher J.L. Austin’s concept of the performative utterance “in which to say something is to do something”, Duncan asks “(...) how does the status of the utterance change according to the register of resonance? And what exactly does the vocal utterance do if this doing is not a linguistic act?”. Duncan investigates what the voice does when it performs singing, and, connecting it to the story about the Mongolian camel, she refers to the effects of the materiality of the voice while posing the critical question of her text:

---

389 The film is *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, directed by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. 2003.
391 Ibid., p. 299.
392 Ibid., p. 298.
393 Ibid., p. 289.
394 I perceive the term materiality according to what OED suggests “Of or pertaining to material nature, or to the phenomenal universe perceived by the senses; pertaining to or connected with matter; material; opposed to psychical, mental, spiritual.” I understand it also as something pertaining of the body, corporeal.
(...) it is indeed interesting that we can clearly understand this kind of force when we see it happening to camels in Mongolia, but not when we imagine people in the developed world going to the opera. What happens to an understanding about the relationship between subject and object once we acknowledge that voice is a resonant operation with physical effects not just for camels in Mongolia?\textsuperscript{395}

Duncan is interested in “the bodily force of performative utterance”,\textsuperscript{396} and reinterprets this issue in connection to the theories of Felman and Butler: in particular, to what Felman describes as the ‘scandal of the speaking body’ in which she emphasizes that speech act is bodily act.\textsuperscript{397} The ‘scandal’ explains how (...) the body imposes its own agency on the linguistic act. An utterance may be guided by knowledge, meaning and intent, but the body constantly interferes with those registers, inserting its own ‘knowledge’, ‘meaning’ and ‘intent’, and thus tempering and tampering with the speech act.\textsuperscript{398}

After acknowledging both Felman’s and Butler’s achievements in studying the performativity of the body, Duncan goes on to critique these two theorists, pointing out their lack of insight into how the voice is connected to the materiality of the body, and into how the voice itself is ‘scandalous’:

Felman, (...) avows both bodily matter and the materiality of bodily effects, although for her, as for Butler, voice remain unattached to the body. Felman is right to call the body the ‘instrument’ of speech, but what is the agency of voice as part of this instrument? What are the effects of voice, as contained within or opposed to the effects of the generic category ‘body’, and how are these effects measurable? How, for example, are tone, pitch and intonation in their own way ‘scandalous’? How does the voice act performatively, apart from merely being the (silent) vehicle for the utterance? As anyone who has ever heard opera knows, the singing voice has moments where it tears language apart, or tears itself apart from language. Certainly the voice as well as and in addition to the body, says more, or says differently, than it means to say.\textsuperscript{399}

The way Anderson comments on her own voice reveals that she perceives it as ‘scandalous’. She sees it as composed from different genetic and cultural factors:

My own voice is a combination of my parent’s voices really. My father learned inflexion from Chicago tough guys, actors like Jimmy Cagney and the comedian Bob Hope mixed with the flattened vowels of the Midwest. My mother’s voice was more academic, a Church of England voice. And I’ve mixed those up and found my own

\textsuperscript{395} Duncan, Op. Cit., p. 299.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., p. 291.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid., p. 290.
\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., p. 293.
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., p. 294.
voice. Of course, that’s not to say I’ve got only one. Like most people
I have at least twenty voices – intimate, conversational, 
authoritarian and so on. In performances I use a mixture of these 
voices. 400

She speaks of the voice as of something inheritable, in the way we inherit the color of our eyes, our 
blood type, or the quality of our hair. She thus emphasizes the material, corporeal side of the voice, 
but at the same time argues that corporeality is culturally conditioned. Anderson answers the 
questions posed by Duncan by vocally interrogating the corporeality of the singing body through the 
gender perspective. By Fenway’s voice in Homeland she creates a make-believe that the body-voice-
gender construct is performative. By putting herself in vocal drag she explicitly performs the 
connections between body, voice and gender, showing that they could be unstable and changeable 
once they are separated from their conventional roles.

The text that Fenway Bergamot presents bears a melancholy note, a regret about ‘these 
days” that have passed, and are left behind sometime long ago, replaced by today’s world of 
passwords, banking cards, experts etc. Fenway starts his monologue in Another Day in America by 
talking about the new beginning:

And so finally here we are, at the beginning of a whole new era.
The start of a brand new world.
And now what?
How do we start?
How do we begin again? 401

If this text had been given in Anderson’s genuine voice, it could have been perceived that she was 
talking about some new historical or political era. But the fact that the text is given in Fenway’s 
‘artificial’, ventriloquial voice makes that ‘new world’ she writes about the world of a different 
gender hierarchy. It makes it one in which gender fiction takes place, one where women can talk 
with what was conventionally perceived as a male voice. The sound of the voice conventionally 
assigned to the male gender, however, makes the meaning of the text different.

The stiffness and machine-like strangeness of the pitch of Bergamot’s voice have an 
authoritarian dimension. The ‘artificial’ pitch and timbre and the mechanized inflection mock 
authority. It appears as if the voice of authority has been reflected in some kind of strange mirror 
that deforms its ‘image’ to the point of caricature. It is a grotesque representation of the (male) 
voice of authority that exaggerates some striking features of authoritarian speech, such as, for 
example preaching.

400 Laurie Anderson, The Record of Time, Sound in the Work of Laurie Anderson, Lyon, Musée d’Art 
Dystopia and Melancholy

Bergamot finishes his performance in *Homeland* by talking about material things, money, and, again in a spirit of melancholy, poses the question about the new beginning:

Oh, another day, another dime.
Another day in America.
Another day, another dollar.
Another day in America.
And all my brothers. And all my long lost sisters.
How do we begin again?
How do we begin?402

At first, this part of the text seems to focus on an economic perspective that gives money, capital, a primary position: days in America are counted by dollars and dimes, as Anderson introduces it. The last verse appears as a question with no answer, but the act of performing and repeating it still produces meaning. By insisting on it and not answering, Bergamot performs what I take to be the hopelessness of US society. Together with other texts, those lines of Fenway make the central feeling in the text, and the piece as a whole, melancholy.

I see that melancholy as Anderson’s reaction to a situation in her country which she sees as dystopia, the opposite from utopia, an imaginary place or condition one must be sure to avoid. Anderson problematizes aspects of contemporary US society, and the way she perceives her country affects the piece, turning it into a construction of dystopia. Melancholy is explicit in some lyrics:

Ah, America. And yes that will be America.
A whole new place just waiting to happen.
Broken up parking lots, rotten dumps, speed balls, accidents and hesitations.
Things left behind. Styrofoam, computer chips.403

What concerns Anderson is a dystopian dimension situated in oppression and control that ‘homeland security’ issues bring to America, and large parts of the texts deal with them. Due to the above-mentioned perspective towards the US homeland, the artist starts to feel ‘homeland-less’, and reflections of that feeling become embedded in the piece.

Another way I read a dystopic dimension in the piece is its destabilization of various conventional positions. The ambivalence of the piece - it exists between conventional genres of rock concert, performance art and postopera, but also in between different musical languages - shows that a ‘homeland’ as a symbol for a secure, stable, unique place does not exist for Anderson in the music world either. The non-existence of a coherent, unique musical language is a powerful generator of Anderson’s ongoing quest for the destabilization of a stable, conventional position: that

402 Ibid.
403 Ibid.
of the citizen, of the woman, of the composer and of the performer. Anderson problematizes her own identity in front of the audience, fluctuating between feminine and masculine gender, between the positions of dissident and US artist, between performance artist and singer-instrumentalist, all within social and cultural circumstances of the contemporary United States she writes about in *Homeland*’s text.

The eclectic collection of musical languages and collage methodology of the piece could be perceived as a wish to see a conventional, secure, unique, modernist identity as a place of dystopia, as something undesirable. I understand Anderson’s need constantly to problematize conventional positions as places to avoid as her reaction to the dystopic dimension of her ‘homeland’, whether it be the state or her artistic position. Anderson’s dystopian postopera in which the position of a woman on stage is reworked in the form of a counter-castrato poses the question of how a woman can take over the voice of authority, make a caricature of it, and at the same time express melancholy because of a dystopia that is embedded in that voice.

Anderson’s enduring preoccupation with vocal drag right through her career speaks of her need to use and question what is conventionally considered the male voice. To mock the voice of authority and to problematize the position of woman on stage are two of the reasons that she chooses to be in the drag of the male voice. Fenway Bergamot in *Homeland* appears as the culmination of that practice. Fenway makes Anderson’s intentions more outspoken. Moreover, Fenway ‘exits’ the work itself, taking the role of the author, and questioning the position of Anderson in the art world. Like the voice of castrato singers, Fenway’s voice too could be seen as a “strange voice in a wrong body”, and as in *Three Tales* the mechanical dimension of that voice produces a particular effect, in this case parodic. The ‘scandal’ of that voice, as discussed in relation to the text by Michelle Duncan, is divided between its mechanical side that brings an authoritarian dimension, and its subversive dimension that disrupts the voice of authority and makes it grotesque. Finally, when understood through the dystopic dimension of *Homeland*, that voice appears as a melancholic voice from a dystopic country.

In both chapters in Part 3, two issues crystalize themselves as of key importance in questioning the body-voice-gender relationship in postopera. The first is that in both cases more-or-less obvious references are made to practices that have thematized body-voice-gender relationships through the history of opera. Thus, the character of Dante in *La Commedia* could be seen as a distant

---

404 One of the curious details from Anderson’s biography is that in 2003 she became first ever National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) artist-in-residence. Taking into account that NASA is agency of the United States government somewhat contradicts the position of Anderson as an artist who disagrees with state politics of USA, as it is demonstrated in *Homeland*. 

141
reference to en travesti roles and Fenway could be seen as a counter-castrato figure. The second is that the problematization of the body-voice–gender relationship in both case studies appears to confirm Butler’s insistence that sex and gender are not nature givens, but cultural constructs. Fenway’s voice is constructed as a caricature of the masculine voice with the aid of technology. Dante’s voice in La Commedia shows the body-voice–gender relationship as a choice of the composer and director and not something pre-determined by nature. The categories of female and male voice are interrogated in both cases, and the rigidity of norms that maintain a binary opposition between male and female voices is brought into doubt: in La Commedia with irony and in Homeland with parody. Following Butler’s conclusion about heterosexual norms, parody and self-subversion imposes itself on both the cases of body-voice–gender questioning I discussed:

It's not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It's all sexual norms. I think that every sexual position is fundamentally comic. If you say "I can only desire X", what you’ve immediately done, in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity. Now, I take it that one of the essential aspects of comedy emerges when you end up actually occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable. That is funny. There’s a terrible self-subversion in it.\textsuperscript{405}

In the case of La Commedia and Homeland, the questioning of norms established in relation to body, sex, gender and identity, as discussed by Butler, has been expanded to body-voice–gender relationships, whose conventional norms are reassessed.