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
Reinventing the Vocalic Body in Postopera: Conclusion

In my Introduction, I outlined four objectives that I wanted to achieve in this study:

- to extend the cultural analysis of opera to the singing body
- to identify the interaction between the singing body and the voice in opera as a site in which different discourses are encoded
- to enrich the field of opera studies with a body/voice theory
- to define the concept of postopera in relation to a set of case studies.

It will be worth reviewing these objectives briefly at this point, as well as discussing some possible ways of extending the research further in new directions.

The last objective – defining the concept of postopera – was addressed already in the Introduction. There I discussed how and why I first introduced the term. Following that, in Chapter 1 (Body-Voice Gap, Postopera and Body/Voice Theory) I introduced ‘postopera’ as a theoretical notion, arguing that my concept of postopera designates opera that is postdramatic and postmodern, as inspired by Hans-Thies Lehmann’s notion of postdramatic theatre. Lehmann’s concept of a postdramatic (not necessarily postmodern) theatre responded to a diverse and wide range of theatre performances created in the last couple of decades. Likewise, my concept of postopera responds to the wide range of recent unconventional postmodern and postdramatic operatic performances that appeared from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards.

My notion of postopera coincides with two similar terms: the notion of post-opera by Jeremy Tambling and the notion of the post-operatic by Nicholas Till and Kandis Cook. In Chapter 1 I discussed the differences between the three terms and concepts. Tambling uses the term post-opera in a non-theoretical way, to refer to what happened after modernist opera, notably the Brecht-Weill collaborations that are his main subject. Till and Cook’s notion of the post-operatic, referring to both postmodern opera and to conventional opera in a postmodern age, is more theoretical. Yet it differs from the notion of postopera as I define it. What they have in common is the reference to postmodernity. But where my concept of postopera only refers to recent pieces, Till and Cook’s notion of the post-operatic includes postmodern ‘readings’ of conventional operatic repertoire. Moreover, the two authors are not explicitly concerned with the postdramatic dimension of the post-operatic, whereas my notion of postopera explicitly refers to concept of the postdramatic in Lehmann’s terms.

Defining postopera was useful for this dissertation at least in two respects. First, it enables me to define a common platform for the pieces that I analyzed. The contemporary opera scene is by no means homogenous or self-consistent. As Salzman and Desi’s book Seeing the Voice, Hearing the
Body confirms, it is rather fragmented, dispersed and difficult to follow. Even ambitious contemporary opera spectacles such as those of Adams/Sellars, Andriessen/Greenaway, Reich/Korot or Glass are not performed often. So even in pragmatic terms it is difficult to follow this scene, since performances are not frequent, and one has to travel worldwide to be able to catch them. Defining the concept of postopera signals this scene of unconventional contemporary opera pieces, and actually proclaims it as a scene.

The second point is one that made me realize how the reinvention of one of the central operatic issues - the relationship between music and drama – significantly contributes to the reinvention of the relationship between the singing body and the voice. In postopera the dramatic text’s relationship with music is reinvented and the relationship between the music and the dramatic text takes a background rather than a foreground position. When I first introduced the notion of postopera I was not fully aware of the significance of the relationship between the body and the voice in this context. A major conclusion of this research is that it is not the relationship between music and drama that reforms opera nowadays; the really significant change, the change that enables opera to problematize its status and function in the age of new media, is a change of the singing body within it. By showing how the singing body was reinvented in six postoperas, and how that reinvention affected the medium of opera, this study demonstrates that the relationship between the body and the voice is the locus for a redefinition both of opera itself and of our understanding of it.

All the pieces I analyze in this study are postoperas. To some extent they are also representative of what was presented as high-budget-late-capitalist ('A production') opera spectacles on European and North American operatic stages during the last two decades. However, I did not select these six postoperas because they are typical examples of late-capitalist opera spectacles. I selected them because they are self-reflexive engagements with my principal subject: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera. Besides the ‘A production’ contemporary opera scene I also followed and sometimes participated as a dramaturgist in independent and small scenes of contemporary opera and music theatre in Europe. Those scenes too provide a number of examples of the thematization of opera as a genre and of the body-voice relationship within it. Of all the pieces from both ‘mainstream’ and independent scenes that I had an opportunity to see, the six that I have chosen present the most relevant sample for the subject I discuss. According to that

407 Except the works that I discuss, this scene also includes operas by John Adams/Peter Sellars, Robert Wilson, Michel Nyman, among the others.
408 Maja Ratkje, Rolf Wallin, Miguel Azguime, Jasna Veličković, Anja Đorđević, Bojan Đordjev, etc. are some of the artists active on that scene.
sample and the research I conducted, I also conclude that a reinvented relationship between the body and the voice might be proclaimed one of the prominent features of postopera.

My concept of postopera invites further investigation in the field of contemporary opera, and one of my future plans is to develop this subject as a research topic in its own right. The literature about contemporary opera in general is exiguous. There are only a few book-length studies that deal exclusively with recent opera.\footnote{For example: John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass’s Akhnaten*, Hanover and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1999; Timothy A. Johnson, *John Adams's Nixon in China: Musical Analysis, Historical and Political Perspectives*, London, Ashgate, 2011.} Moreover, according to Lindenberger, it is still debatable if opera studies exist as an independent discipline at all.\footnote{Lindenberger discusses reasons pro and contra why and how this discipline should (not) be established. Herbert Lindenberger, “Epilogue: Why (What, How, If) opera studies?”, in *Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 263-279.} Broadening the research on postopera would make a pioneering contribution both to the field of postopera that still waits to be theorized as cultural practice, and to opera studies. Taken as a subject for separate research, the concept of postopera would show how, in the wake of Wagner’s “Opera and Drama” and Kerman’s “Opera as Drama”, we might today discuss what I call ‘opera after drama’, or ‘opera beyond drama’: in other words, ‘postopera’. That research would also bring new insights into how the status and function of opera are transformed when the relationship between music and drama is interrogated. The concept of postopera, developed in a broader way, could offer both a theoretical background and a more detailed ‘map’ for the performing practice of unconventional contemporary opera today.

Concerning the second objective in my Introduction - Identifying the mutual interaction between the singing body and the voice in opera as a site in which different discourses are encoded – this ‘identification’ was necessary to set this whole research operation into the motion in the first place. I made my way from the mere registering of unconventional relationships between the singing body and the voice to the reading of that relationship in postopera as a theoretically meaningful statement, and then discussing it further in relation to different theories. By making it visible for theoretical discussion I wanted to show that the body-voice relationship is postopera’s equal constitutive part and that it is as relevant to postopera as are its other texts - music, libretto or staging.

The first impulse for this identification of the body-voice relationship as a site in which different discourses are encoded came from operatic practice. Since my first encounters with opera I was always intrigued by what I call the ‘gap’ between the voice and the body there. The voice was usually over-expressive, and the body often under-expressive, and this ventriloquism-like discrepancy was supposed to be perceived as self-explanatory. Probably because, according to my social status and cultural background, I was not an ideal opera consumer, this discrepancy seemed
unacceptable to me, and I even found it somewhat irritating. I perceived the gap between the body and the voice in opera as an undefined ‘surplus of meaning’ that needed to be discussed. The gap exists in conventional opera and it continues to exist in different modalities when new media enter opera. In the six pieces I have analyzed the gap between the body and the voice is not accepted as a convention. It is reworked, reinvented, and problematized in different ways. Those reinventions are at the same time (at least implicitly) critical both of the institution of the opera, and of the ways we understand it.

In all six postoperas various forms of recording techniques, video, film, digital technology are used. In all of them the microphones mediate the singing voice. That significantly changed both how opera looks and how it sounds. And, as was shown in all my case studies, technology not only enables the pieces, but becomes embedded into their concepts. The problematization of vocal uniqueness in One could not have been achieved without a virtuosic interlacing between the projected sound/image and the live performance. The monstrous voice that I discuss in Three Tales could not have been presented without complex electronic vocal transformations there. The desynchronization on which La Belle et la Bête is conceived could not have been performed without questioning technology and the representational mechanisms of film and opera, simultaneously. The singing bodies of La Commedia and Writing to Vermeer are both significantly determined by the technology involved in the staging. Finally, the vocal drag performed in Homeland is made possible by an electronic pitch-shifting device.

I showed how in One the technologically upgraded relationship between the body and the voice becomes a major semiotic generator of this piece, and how such a changed body-voice construct problematizes issues about voice, identity, uniqueness and opera. In Three Tales the body-voice relationship conditioned by monstrous voice functions as a critique of cloning seen as monstrosity. De-synchronization between the body and the voice in La Belle et la Bête speaks of how what is seen in opera and in film changes meaning in relation to what is heard alongside what is seen. In Writing to Vermeer the de-synchronization between triplicate female characters and one voice interrogates the position of women on the opera stage and also the genre of opera and its relation to classical painting and new media. The reinvention of vocalic body that includes vocal travesty in La Commedia underlines that the gender of the voice is a cultural construct. Finally, a made-up man’s voice of the constructed male character in Homeland questions how the representation of woman on stage as one that does (not) have the voice of authority affects a body-voice-gender relationship. It also shows that the binary division of man’s voice and woman’s voice should be brought into question.
The type of reinvention of the mutual interaction between the singing body and the voice in these postoperas also influenced the global structure of this dissertation’s text. I divided my case studies into three groups according to the ways the body-voice relationship is reinvented in the pieces. In Part 1 (Voices beyond Corporeality: Performing Singing as Upgrading) I discuss how in One and Three Tales the body-voice relationship is ‘upgraded’ by technology intervening upon the performing body. In La Belle et la Bête and Writing to Vermeer, discussed in Part 2 (Throwing the Voice, Catching the Body: Opera, Ventriloquism and De-synchronization), different reinventions of the singing body take place. The keywords for how the body-voice relationship is reinvented there are de-synchronization and ventriloquism. Part 3 (Singing Gender (As a Performance)) contains discussions about the reinvention of vocalic bodies in La Commedia and in Homeland. In these pieces the relationship between the singing body and the voice is reinvented in relation to the vocal representation of gender and sex. In both of them the stereotypes of body-voice-gender relationship are problematized.

As to how this line of research could be developed further in opera studies, the examination and interpretation of the singing body in opera could be broadened to embrace conventional opera repertoire. It would be challenging, and I believe illuminating, to attempt a history theorisation of the singing body in opera more generally. On the other hand, I am aware of possible limits to that research imposed by the available sources. When relying only on the scores and written sources about early opera performances, the analysis of the body-voice relationship could be a difficult task. In an ideal case it would be necessary to have video recordings of the analyzed pieces because how the piece is staged and how the voices are ‘composed’ to match the singing bodies significantly influences the body-voice relations in opera.

My third declared objective - enriching the field of opera studies by confronting it with a body/voice theory - was addressed through all the chapters. I was particularly intrigued by recent developments in theories of the voice, where the voice is interpreted not only as a vehicle of linguistic meaning, but as a material, and performative, corporeal agent. Voice studies as a separate academic discipline does not exist, and theories of the voice appear in different disciplines such as philosophy, feminist critique, musicology, film studies, and theatre studies. The singing body of opera itself crosses several disciplines – musicology, opera studies and theatre studies. It might be one of the reasons that the singing body remained ‘concealed’ from critical theory for a long time. It was not on the ‘radar’ of musicology, except perhaps in matters of vocal technique.

After registering the gap between the singing body and the sung voice in operatic practice, I looked for its explanation in theory. I found some discussions of this problem of mismatch, gap,

411 A book on the subject within theatre studies was published recently: Andrew M. Kimbrough, Dramatic Theories of Voice in The Twentieth Century, New York, Cambria Press, 2011.
de/synchronization, and the ventriloquism-like relationship between the body and the voice in opera studies (Abbate, Brooks and Grover-Friedlander), in theories of ventriloquism (Connor), and in theories of the body and the voice in general (Dolar, Žižek). I mapped their writings onto the subject in the Introduction and in Chapter 1. At first I was satisfied with Dolar’s conclusion about the gap: that the mismatch happens because the real place of production of the voice could never be seen. I believed that the core of this body-voice ‘mismatch’, “poor fit between speaker and voice” as Connor puts it, or ventriloquism-like use of the voice, indeed lies in the impossibility of seeing how the voice is produced and from where it emerges. While working on this dissertation, however, I unexpectedly had a chance to test this out in a rather different context.

While an otorinolaringologist was performing the examination of rhinoscopy on me, he encouraged me to see the ‘live’ video projection of my vocal chords while I talked. It was a sobering experience. The mismatch between what I saw and what I heard when the image of my talking vocal chords was video-projected live appeared even more profound than the body-voice mismatch I knew before that: I couldn’t perceive any apparent connection between movements of my interior organs and the expressions of my voice. Even when I was finally able to see the concealed source of the voice, it did not explain the body-voice mismatch I am interested in. This for me confirmed that the key to understanding the body-voice relationship does not lie in the empirical, but in a symbolic, connection between the two. And that symbolic connection is culturally conditioned. It is different in film (moreover it is different in Italian cinematography and American cinematography for example), ventriloquism, lip-dubbing videos, conventional opera, and postopera.

I outlined the theoretical context I refer to in the Introduction and in Chapter 1. It started with explaining and discussing Connor’s concept of the vocalic body in the Introduction (Reinventing Vocalic Body (In Opera), Reinventing Vocalic Body (In Theory)). Concerning the understanding of the singing body-sung voice relationship, the concept of the vocalic body was of great value since it is based precisely on the mutual interaction between the body and the voice. I understand that the body-voice relationship, according to Connor’s concept of the vocalic body, functions as a kind of vocal mirror – one hears the voice s/he produces, but at the same time the produced voice affects the identity of the one who produced it and thus ‘closes the circle’ of mutual influences. It functions

---

412 The voice theory found its way to opera through psychoanalytical theory before. For example: Michel Poizat, The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera, Ithaca, N. Y., Cornell University Press, 1992. Žižek, Slavoj, and Salecl, Renata (eds.), Gaze and Voice as Love Objects, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1996. Most of the voice theories that I consider in this study, however, do not come from psychoanalysis, but from feminist theory (Cavarero, Dame), film studies (Chion, Altman) or ventriloquism (Connor, Felderer) or opera studies themselves (Abbate, Duncan).

like an image in the mirror: the body produces the image in the mirror, but that image reflects back, and affects the identity of the body at the same time. Thus, in this study the singing body is considered to be the vocalic body in Connor’s terms, emphasizing a mutual relationship between the body and the voice.

The other theories I discuss come from different disciplines, and might be grouped into three categories according to the concepts they problematize, as I showed in Chapter 1: theory of voice (vocal uniqueness (Cavarero), politics of voice (Dolar), speaking machines (Felderer), acousmatic voice (Chion), soundtrack as ventriloquist (Altman)), theory of body (transplanted organ that intrudes the identity (Nancy), prosthesis (Stone), restaging the monstrous body (Kunst), the body as between man and animal (Agamben)), and theories drawn from opera studies that discuss issues in relation to the singing body (envoicing women in opera (Abbate), unveiled voices (Dame), scandal of the singing body (Duncan)). The diversity of theories mirrors the diversity of the reinventions of the vocalic body that was explored in different case studies. There is no single theory that could engage with my various postoperas and the various reinventions of the singing body in them. Thus, my position is relativist.

In Chapter 2 I read One against the backdrop of concepts of vocal uniqueness by Adriana Cavarero, the concept of the intruder by Jean-Luc Nancy and the concept of prosthesis and its performativity by Sandy Stone. Those theories enabled discussion on the subjects that One itself proposes: how vocal uniqueness relates to identity via the body, how identity and vocal uniqueness are questioned by overemphasizing uniqueness, how destabilized identity relates to the performance, and how the concept of prosthesis affects identity. In Chapter 3, where I analyze Three Tales, I establish the concept of the monstrous voice. Kunst’s theory about the restaging of the monstrous body initiates the discussion, while Felderer’s theorizations about the unsettling effect of a voice produced by a machine enable me to connect it to the unsettling effects produced by the deformed voices in Three Tales. Relating it to Dolar’s concept of the politics of the voice, based on the voice’s division between meaning and sounding, I conclude that the politics of the monstrous voice in Three Tales is to critique the invasion of the human body by technology, or the ‘monsterizing’ of it by cloning.

In Chapter 4 I use Agamben’s theory to demonstrate how the relationship between man and animal embodied in the Beast may be represented vocally. I also use Chion’s theory of the acousmatic voice to show how the estrangement of the voice that appears to come from elsewhere than its apparent source produces meaning, and questions opera’s potential to use film and its representational mechanism. I also make an analogy with how Rick Altman uses the concept of ventriloquism in film theory to show how music in Glass’s opera could be viewed as the
ventriloquist. In Chapter 5 with the concept of the envoicing of women in opera by Carolyn Abbate I demonstrate how synchronization between singing bodies and sung voices in opera is impossible. In Chapter 6 I analyze the body-voice-gender relationship by using the theoretical concept of ‘unveiled voices’ by Joke Dame that dismantles stereotypes of vocal representation in relation 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. In the last chapter I confront Homeland with the text “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body” by Michelle Duncan in which she argues that the singing voice of opera is corporeal and ‘scandalous’. I investigate how the body ‘tempers and tampers’ with the singing and speech act of Laurie Anderson. It makes me wonder why and how I determine according to the voice I hear if the person is the man or the woman, and how the stereotypes of gendered voice affect not only the linguistic meaning of what I hear, but also of what I see. Importing all these theories into opera studies enables debates and insights that are invited both by the singing body, and by the concept of postopera so that their different aspects might be theoretically illuminated.

Finally, the first objective outlined in the Introduction - extending the cultural analysis of opera to the singing body – has been addressed by conducting this research and writing a book-length study whose subject is singing corporeality in postopera. As I stated in the Introduction, for me the singing body is neither invisible, nor inaudible; it establishes meanings in postopera and it becomes one of the major driving forces in it. My argument was developed and supported through six case studies in which I read the body-voice relationship as a text and emphasized that text’s intertextuality by confronting it with different theories of body and of voice. In accordance with Dolar’s elaborations on how there is no ‘perfect sound’, how “we cannot hear a voice without it carrying a story along with it, a history, a telltale web of traces, a vast panoply of experience”, how body is embedded in the singing voice, and how the singing voice betrays “the personal history and habitus, gender, age, region, education, childhood, culture, training, social status, a lifetime of experience and social practice”, and bearing in mind his claims that all these practices “sneak into the voice, they taint it, they stain it, they contaminate, they infiltrate”, I traced, deciphered and explained some of those possible ‘contaminations’ and ‘infiltrations’ and their significance in the singing body of postopera.414

I argue that the scope of the influence that singing body has in (post)opera is much bigger than the attention it presently gets both in opera theory and in opera practice. It is that imbalance that I hoped to improve by this study. I showed not only how the body-voice relationship that

constitutes singing corporeality is meaningful, but also how in the postoperas I discussed this relationship becomes crucial for redefining the whole medium of opera. Aside from its contribution to opera studies, this research of the relationship between the body and the voice could be seen as a contribution to theatre and performance studies, dance studies, and to the theorization of other practices that involve speaking or singing, including theatre, dance, video, and performance art. Moreover, to research the relationship between the body and the voice in postopera is to signal the importance of the relationship between the body and the voice in other cultural practices, such as lectures, radio or TV programs, religious rituals, civil ceremonies, lip-dubbing videos, and many others. Finally, this research could also be seen as a potential contribution to the performance practice of postopera, and of other performing arts whose constitutive part is the relationship between the body and the voice.

Problematizing the relationship between the body and the voice in practices as diverse as contemporary opera and theatre, voice lifting or lip-dubbing videos all demonstrate that the relationship between the body and the voice and their mutual representation should not and cannot be neglected. Practices of re-juvenation, where people are subjected to a procedure of voice lifting in order to make their voice sound younger, or the mismatch between what is heard and what is seen in the postoperas I analyzed, both indicate, albeit in very different ways, that the relationship between the body and the voice is recognized as a site for the production of meaning.

Following this research into the reinvention of the vocalic body in postopera my own perception of this specific relationship has also been reinvented. Now when I am confronted with a new opera, music theatre piece, or theatre performance, I find myself examining how the performing bodies and voices are related to each other. If the singing/speaking body is upgraded by technology, and that upgrade is heard through the voice, it usually re-defines the identity of the one who speaks or sings together with its position in the piece. Or, I look for how and why bodies and voices are de/synchronized, and how the mismatch redefines the spectacle I am observing, and what that redefinition tells me about what I am hearing or listening to. Finally, it makes me wonder how gender and sex are embedded in the voice I am hearing, and how that affects what is performed. If the body-voice relationship is unconventional and thus subject to interrogation, that is surely an indicator of changes to the status and the function of the piece, problematizing and stretchings the boundaries of its world.

415 Voice lifting is a recently developed plastic surgery procedure. It is the operative intervention on vocal chords that are being tightened in order to make the voice to sound younger. Lip-dubbing is a popular way of visualizing existing music by adding to it a video in which the actors appear to be singing the words of music. In that process, however, the mismatch, de/synchronization between the voice that is heard, and the body of the singer that allegedly performs it stays obvious. David de la Fuente Garcia “The Music of the Internet Screen: the Lip Dubbing”, paper delivered at the Eleventh International Conference of the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, April 18-21, 2012.