Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera

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Summary in English

The title of this study is Singing Corporeality: Reinventing the Vocalic Body in Postopera. The first part of the title – Singing Corporeality – refers to the body that sings. In this study I perceive it through the relationship between the singing body and the sung voice. The second part of the title – Reinventing the Vocalic Body in Postopera – brings notions that immediately call for additional explanation. The verb ‘to reinvent’ has several meanings and points to something invented again, remade or redone, or brought into use again. Vocalic body, or voice-body is a theoretical concept developed and defined by Steven Connor in the context of his investigations into the cultural history of ventriloquism. As is usually understood, the body produces the voice. The concept of the vocalic body emphasizes that the other way round is not only possible, but happens all the time. Finally, with the notion of postopera I designate opera that is at the same time postmodern and postdramatic (according to the concept of postdramatic theatre proposed by Hans-Thies Lehmann, 1999).

The subject of this study is the operatic singing body and its reinvention in recent operatic works that I call postoperas. Both in opera studies and in the majority of operatic pieces the singing body is often taken for granted. My main argument is that the body-voice relationship establishes meanings produced by opera and that furthermore it becomes one of the major driving forces in recent opera. This relationship should be considered as such when opera is analyzed. I discuss how the mutual relationship between body and voice is reinvented in recent operatic practice. The reinvention in question assumes the changes that came as the result of the impact of new media, a de-synchronization between image and sound, or a redefinition of body-voice-gender relationships in opera. I also examine the ways in which the relationship between the singing body and the voice is considered in theory. I refer to how a concept of the vocalic body is reinvented in the context of opera studies. In that respect, this study strives to establish itself as the reinvention of the singing body in opera theory.

By showing how the singing body constitutes opera’s meanings I intend to achieve four aims:

- extend the cultural analysis of opera to the singing body
- identify the theme of interaction between the singing body and the voice in opera as a site in which different discourses are encoded
- enrich the field of opera studies by confronting it with the theory of voice and body
- introduce and define the concept of postopera, thus creating a theoretical context and common ‘scene’ for analyzed pieces

These four aims constitute at the same time a major contribution of this dissertation towards opera studies.
In the pieces that I have chosen to analyze – La Belle et la Bête (1994) by Philip Glass and Jean Cocteau, Writing to Vermeer (1997-98) by Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway, Michel van der Aa and Saskia Boddeke, Three Tales (1998-2002) by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot, One (2002) by Michel van der Aa, Homeland (2007) by Laurie Anderson and La Commedia (2004-2008) by Louis Andriessen and Hal Hartley – the relationship between the singing body and the voice becomes a site for creative exploration where the boundaries of the opera world are stretched. The vocalic bodies of the singers in these pieces could be interpreted as theoretically meaningful statements, making the body-voice relationship a place of discursive density. I specifically chose these operas for analysis because they address the questions of the relationship between the singing body and the voice. The principle of the vocalic body becomes obvious in them in various ways. In One and Three Tales technological procedures are used to produce detached, machine-like, even ‘monstrous’ vocal expression. They reflect back to the singing body and question its identity. In both La Belle et la Bête and Writing to Vermeer a purposely-obtained de-synchronization between multiplied bodies that are assigned to a single voice problematizes their mutual ‘belonging’ to each other. Finally, in La Commedia and in Homeland the way in which vocal representation of gender is projected onto the ‘wrong’ body confronts us with a break in the conventions of representation between body, voice and gender.

Concerning the coordinates in which these chosen pieces emerge, the temporal frame is between 1994 and 2008. The territory encompassed involves the Netherlands and the United States of America, since the composers of the operas depicted here are significant figures within the field of repetitive music established in the USA (Reich, Glass, Anderson), a musical language that received one of its most fruitful and productive responses in the Netherlands (Andriessen, Van der Aa). The social system discussed is that of late capitalism. With this range of recent operas my intention is not to illustrate some examples of contemporary operas within late capitalism, nor to map current trends. These works are chosen because the vocalic body becomes increasingly problematic in them in various ways, reinterpreting in turn the institution and the world of opera. Moreover, for me these and similar pieces are an impulse for establishing the concept of postopera. With this concept I reply to a wide range of operatic practices that has appeared in Western musical theatre since the last quarter of the twentieth century, practices for which the use of the notion of opera becomes somewhat inadequate.

The text of this dissertation consists of an introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. In the Introduction and in Chapter 1 a theoretical ‘map’ is outlined and discussed. Each of the following chapters (Chapter 2 to Chapter 7) provides a case study. The chapters are divided in three parts according to different thematizations of body-voice relationships in them, as follows: Part 1: Voices
In each one of the analyzed works the body-voice gap plays a significant role since it is reworked in different ways, whether upgraded with the help of technology as shown in Part 1, deliberately deepened by over-emphasizing de-synchronizing ventriloquial features as discussed in Part 2, or ‘queered’ by performing a mismatch that depends on body – voice – gender de-synchronicities as explained in Part 3.

The purpose of the first chapter Body-Voice Gap, Postopera and Theory of Voice, a theoretical introduction to this study, is to outline and theorize three issues of particular importance for the subject: 1) the problem of ‘the gap’ between the singing body and the voice in opera; 2) the concept of postopera; and 3) theories of voice and body that I use to illuminate the reinvention of the body-voice relationship in postopera. I discuss views of the body-voice gap in opera in texts by Carolyn Abbate (1991), Peter Brooks (2000) and Michal Grover-Friedlander (2005, 2011). Revealing the mismatch between the body and the voice as the core of opera’s representational mechanism enables me to observe my theoretical objects from that point of view in subsequent chapters. Texts by Abbate, Brooks and Grover-Friedlander all tackle the problem of the body-voice gap and illuminate it from different perspectives. Abbate emphasizes the division between the liveness of the singing body and its awareness of its own singing, and the ‘deafness’ of operatic characters as to both the causes and the consequences of that division. Brooks writes about opera’s denial of realistic representation as of the result of different demands for dramatic representations of the voice and of the body that result in the disembodiment of the voice. Finally, Grover-Friedlander argues that re-voicing, the re-attaching of voices and bodies on screen, reveals that the unity of body and voice is only a ‘trick’.

Concerning the concept of postopera, I define it primarily in relation to the concept of postdramatic theatre by Lehmann. I discuss it, however, both in relation to Jeremy Tambling’s suggestions of what happened post opera, i.e. after opera or after the modernist opera project came to an end (1996), and Nicholas Till’s elaborations of postmodern opera and opera in the postmodern age in relation to notions of the post-operatic introduced by this author and his collaborator Kandis Cook (2002, 2004). Till and Cook’s notion of the post-operatic designates both postmodern opera and opera in the age of postmodernism. Opera in the age of postmodernism in their interpretation refers also to conventional operatic repertoire and its various postmodern ‘readings’. Contrary to that, the notion of postopera that I propose does not refer to conventional opera and its contemporary reworkings, but only to unconventional recently-composed works. Till and Cook do
not clearly specify a postdramatic dimension to their post-operative productions, while I insist that what is named postopera should be postdramatic and postmodern at the same time.

Finally, mapping the concepts from theories of the voice and the body relevant to the reinvention of the body-voice relationship in postopera enables me both to explore how those concepts work in the context of opera studies and how they illuminate the vocalic body in my later case studies. I divide the concepts I have depicted as the major theoretical ‘protagonists’ for discussion in the following chapters into three groups according to the issues they address. The first group comprises theories about voice (the voice in general and in film, not just its role in music or opera; Rick Altman: 1980, Michel Chion: 1994, 1999, Adriana Cavarero: 2005, Mladen Dolar: 2006, Brigitte Felderer: 2008). The second group comprises theories that discuss some curious cases in relation to the body and identity (Sandy Stone: 1995, Jean-Luc Nancy: 2003, Giorgio Agamben: 2004, Bojana Kunst: 2008). The body that is being re-defined for various reasons (the prosthetic body, the body with transplanted organs, the monstrous body, the body as between man and animal) affects identity in various ways, and these mutual influences are discussed. Unlike the first and second groups of theories, the third group contains theories that are developed in opera studies and that discuss issues in relation to the singing body (Carolyn Abbate: 1993, Michelle Duncan: 2004, Joke Dame: 2006). The shifts between these different theories from different disciplines are partly a reflection of the heterogeneity of the reinvention of the vocalic body in postopera that I am trying to bring into view. The body-voice gap, postopera and theories of voice and body are discussed in all subsequent chapters: I analyze the de-synchronous relationship between the body and the voice in a group of postoperas, and also use concepts from theories of the voice and theories of the body to illuminate reinventions of the vocalic body in my theoretical objects.

In Part 1 I am concerned with how and why singing in some postoperas appears beyond the body that produces it and with what the meaning produced in such a particular mutual agency between the singing body and the voice tells us about postopera, its status and function. In both postoperas I have chosen as theoretical objects – One and Three Tales – the voice that is heard is the result of connecting the forces of the body with technological interventions performed upon the voice and body. In One the main intervention comes in relation to live performance and the reproduced video involving one performer. The live singing body only partly produces the final vocal result, and that vocal result reflects itself back to the singing body and changes its identity. The prominent gap between the technologically upgraded voice and the ‘natural’ body as its primary source is reinvented. In Three Tales voices are pre-recorded and transformed, and brought into the sphere of the monstrous by procedures conducted by the composer.
In Chapter 2 *Singing beyond the Body: Uniqueness, Intruder and Prosthesis* I read *One* against the backdrop of several theoretical concepts: the concept of vocal uniqueness by Cavarero, the concept of the intruder by Nancy and the concept of prosthesis and its performativity by Stone. Looking at *One* in the light of Cavarero’s concept of vocal uniqueness enables me to show how the concept of vocal uniqueness is tied to the concept of identity via the body, the voice, and their mutual relation in postopera, but also how both concepts of identity and of vocal uniqueness could be destabilized by overemphasizing uniqueness, as happened in *One*, where uniqueness is deconstructed by its own multiplication. Nancy’s concept of the intruder allows a better understanding of destabilized identity, which in *One* intrudes upon the performance. The concept of prosthesis by Stone interrogates one’s relation to one’s own extended body, and this affects its identity. The body-voice relationship, implying multiplicity, virtuosity, extension, and mobility, changes opera’s ontology.

In Chapter 3 *Monstrous Singing: The Politics of Vocal Existence*, my concern is with how singing appears monstrous as a result of existing beyond the body that produces it, with the politics of the monstrous voice and with the consequences this has for the opera. I analyze the body-voice relationship in *Three Tales*, paying specific attention to the novel techniques of ‘dissecting the voice’ that Steve Reich introduces. The emphasis is particularly on Act 3: *Dolly*, which raises a number of issues regarding cloning, artificial intelligence and defining what is human, whilst also using a number of novel techniques for singing. I use several theoretical texts in discussing *Three Tales*: Kunst’s “Restaging the Monstrous”, Dolar’s theories on the politics and linguistics of the voice, and Felderer’s text on speaking machines. Kunst’s text is about the status of the monstrous body and its political and theatrical productivity based on a division within the human, and the constant production of the norm of what is human and what is not. I use this text to develop the monstrous voice concept and to show how the singing body in *Three Tales* is vocally manifested as a monster. Dolar’s theory helps me to locate the political dimension of the monstrous voice. Felderer’s text brings the historical examination of speaking mechanisms, and together with Connor’s elaborations of disembodied voice, I use it to examine the uneasiness produced by monstrous voices in *Three Tales*. If Reich and Korot’s comments about the political distribution of power were sung by conventional operatic voices, the effect would have been much different, I suggest, and not adversely critical. Using the monstrous singing voice is what gives their critique its sharp edge. Reich and Korot warn us how terrible the voice of artificial humanity may sound. Vocally performing the horror of artificial life, hearing it through non-human, deformed human voice, is what makes their critique poignant, memorable, and effective in influencing the public sphere and the distribution of power within it.
I show in Part 1, how in both *One* and *Three Tales* the vocalic body has been reinvented. In both of them the voices appear beyond the body that produces them, and the singing reveals the body that has been ‘upgraded’ by technology. In *One* the effect of such a reinvented mismatch is at the same time an enhancement of performing abilities and a denial of the performer’s uniqueness. *One* demonstrates a fascination with prosthetic relations and with the ways they improve the performativity of the human body and the voice in their mutual relationship. In *Three Tales*, however, the fascination is negative, and the way the body-voice relationship is reinvented I read as an artist’s warning that humanity is incapable of adequately responding to the powerful challenges that technology brings. A monstrous voice enables this postopera to function as a critique of monstrosity, which its authors perceive in the power-related usage of technology, especially in cloning and genetic engineering.

In Part 2, I am interested in the ventriloquial relationship between bodies and voices that appear as the result of purposely obtained de-synchronization. My theoretical objects are two postoperas in which de-synchronization between what is seen and what is heard on stage plays a central role: *La Belle et la Bête* and *Writing to Vermeer*. In both of those pieces several bodies refer to a single singing voice simultaneously. In *La Belle et la Bête* the live singing voice ‘belongs’ at the same time both to live singers on stage and projected film characters. In *Writing to Vermeer* triplicated acting characters on stage ‘share’ the same voice. A similar situation happens to the live singing body and its simultaneous video projection in Scene 2, when the character of Saskia first appears, singing live and video-projected at the same time.

In Chapter 4 *Operatizing the Film: Body without Voice and Voice without Body* I first show what it means to operatize the film, to reveal the concept and procedures on which *La Belle et la Bête* is based and which affect the body-voice relationship. This is followed by a discussion of synchronization in relation to dubbing and playback: I focus on questions on the looseness of synchronization between the operatic singing bodies and their (dis)embodied voices in this case, and the ventriloquial dimension that exists between them. I explore (de)synchronous relations between the presence of the body and of the voice in *La Belle et la Bête*, and the implications that a reinvented body-voice construct produces. I also demonstrate, with the help of Agamben’s theory, how the relationship between man and animal embodied in the Beast is represented vocally, and that despite all the efforts to synchronize image and sound the gap between the body and the voice remains. I use Chion’s theory of the acousmatic voice to show how estrangement of the voice that appears to come from elsewhere than its apparent source produces meaning, and questions opera’s potential to use other media and their mechanisms of representation. Finally, I postulate a new model for the conceptualisation of the body-voice relationship in this piece through analogy to how
Altman uses the concept of ventriloquism in film theory: the operatic music composed by Philip Glass is a ventriloquist who takes someone else’s ‘dummy’ (moving images of Cocteau’s film in this case). Glass’s music is attached to Cocteau’s film in synchronization to create the illusion that the singing is produced by the characters in the silent film. The (de)synchronization of the singing body and the voice in this case indexes the power of this opera to examine representational mechanisms of both film and opera, while using them to change its own status and economy.

My analysis of the relationship between singing body and voice in Writing to Vermeer in Chapter 5 Singing Letters, Multiplied Bodies and Dissociated Voice examines how strategies of staging (a visual triplication of characters), music (a musical dramaturgy that does not follow the dramaturgy of the libretto), writing (questioning of écriture féminine and the adultery motive in relation to the subject/object position of woman), and mediation (simulation and close-up procedure in Scene 2) interfere in the connection between bodies and voices on stage. The staging shows Vermeerian women, embodied in the triplicate characters of Vermeer’s wife Catharina, his mother-in-law Maria and the model Saskia, that, unlike women in Vermeer’s paintings, have voices. I read those strategies of envoicing against the backdrop of the concept of envoicing the women in opera by Abbate. I do that in order to show how attributing and de-synchronizing the singing voice to triplicate women figures generates meaning about the status of woman as subject/object in postopera, and how that affects the vocalic body. While analysing the procedures applied in music, my concern is with Andriessen’s intention to maintain the musical dramaturgy independent from the dramaturgy of the libretto. I investigate how this independence relates to the body-voice relationship. In relation to strategies of writing and their interfering in the connection between bodies and voices on stage, I read Greenaway’s libretto against the backdrop of the concept of écriture féminine by Hélène Cixous (1976). That helps me to reveal the simulation strategies that he uses when he plays with this concept, but also to show how he questions it. The adultery motive that appears in the libretto, together with the questioning of écriture féminine, demonstrates how the female characters function as objects in a masculine discourse, and how they appear to strive to become subjects. Concerning mediation and how it affects the relationship between body and voice, I offer a close reading of the scene in which the character of Saskia sings live on stage, while at the same time her close-up is projected on the big screen, so that it looks as if her voice is dubbed to her projected image. All these strategies together significantly affect the conventional relation between body and voice, making it desynchronous, ventriloquial.

The main cause of de-synchronization in both pieces discussed in Part 2 is the fact that a single singing voice simultaneously refers to more than one body. These procedures confirm Grover-Friedlander’s claims that the unity between body and voice is merely a ‘trick’. That ‘trick’ is
manifestly thematized in *La Belle et la Bête*, where it becomes a conceptual motor for the piece, while an awareness of that ‘trick’ is embedded in the representational mechanism of *Writing to Vermeer*. The ‘impossible synchronization’ in both postoperas speaks of different divisions: between opera and film, man and animal, image and sound, live and reproduced, subject and object. I show how the problematization of those divisions and the reinvention of the body-voice relationship in these pieces effectively reinvent the medium of opera.

Part 3 examines 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* and *Homeland*. In both works, the issue of body-voice-gender relationships 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 electronically processing her voice to sound masculine, with the help of a pitch harmonizer (a pitch-shifting device).

In *Chapter 6 Voice and Gender Standing Apart* I initially investigate the postdramatic condition of *La Commedia* by elaborating on its multiple 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, and 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 is on vocal travesty in relation to the character of Dante, and on the way that gender is related to that vocalic body. I use Dame’s theory, which relativizes the relationship between voice, sex and gender to examine how this is manifested in the case of *La Commedia*’s Dante character. The notion of a female taking the role of Dante erases binary oppositions of the genders in opera, together with our perception of them. The singing Dante character, enlightened by the theories of Dame, enacts the relationship between gender and voice as a performance, and not as something predetermined by nature.

In the last chapter *Vocal Drag, Counter-Castrato and the Scandal of the Singing Body* I discuss how in *Homeland* Anderson problematizes the body-voice-gender relationship, focusing on the figure of her male alter-ego Fenway 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 Cavarero (2005), Filipa Lã and Jane W. Davidson (2005) and Michel Poizat (1992). I discuss how castrato singers expose relationships between body, voice and gender, and also how they undermine conventional voice-gender construct. That exposure and that undermining make the figure of the castrato productive for my reading of how the body-voice-gender construct is reinvented in the case of Bergamot, whom I understand as being a kind of counter-castrato figure. Finally, I confront *Homeland* with the text “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body” by Michelle Duncan. Duncan argues that the singing voice of opera is corporeal and ‘scandalous’, borrowing the concept of the scandal of the body from Shoshana Felman (2002). 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 ‘tempers and tampers’ with the singing and speech act of Laurie Anderson, and what happens with the body-voice-gender construct when vocal drag takes place.

The problematization of the body-voice–gender relationship in both case studies in Part 3 appear to confirm Butler’s insistence that sex and gender are not natural givens but cultural constructs. 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.