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The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music

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V

THEMA (OMAGGIO A JOYCE):

A LISTENING EXPERIENCE AS HOMAGE TO CATHY BERBERIAN¹

Although live performance is the core of Cathy Berberian's work, in Luciano Berio's tape composition *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (1958) her role is different. Tape music is not performed by a live performer; in a concert situation, the performance of the composition consists of the playing of the tape. What does this imply for the role of the vocalist? What is Berberian's role in *Thema*?

This essay begins with a critical discussion of the writings of Berio and others about Berberian's part and the role of the female voice in *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*. Philosophical, literary and phonetic theories on the voice (by Cavarero, Attridge and Fónagy) provide counterparts that help to conceive the voice in a different way. In line with the notion of the open art work,² or better: the open work of interpretation and the listener response theory,³ I will discuss the role of the female voice within different interpretations of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*. It is possible to relate its allusion to the mythological Siren to language and sound, female voice and technology.

¹ This chapter will appear as an article in Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anne Sivuoja, Pieter Verstraete (eds.), *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, forthcoming.

² Flo Menezes (2005: 36–37) argues that Berio's compositions are open artworks, open to a continuous and endless process of interpretative settling. But from a standpoint of listener/reader response, one could argue that this process of interpretation does not have to be licensed by the composer or by the artwork but that it is the responsibility of the listener/reader/spectator as to how to interpret any work of art or music.

³ For the listener response theory see Dame (1994: 45–64).

V.1 *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*

Thema (Omaggio a Joyce) is one of the first tape compositions with a female voice and it belongs to the canon of twentieth-century art music.⁴ The work was composed as part of the radio documentary *Omaggio a Joyce: Documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico*, produced by Luciano Berio and Umberto Eco in 1958 at the Studio di Fonologia of the RAI in Milan. (This radio documentary was not broadcast at the time.) It was later released on CD by CIDIM/RAI (2000).⁵ Different stereo versions of the composition *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* were released on LP and CD.⁶ The recording that was restored and remastered under supervision of Berio in 1995 and released on CD in 1998 is my main reference for this chapter.⁷ The duration of this recording is 8 minutes and 12 seconds.

Although sometimes not recognisable as such, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* is completely made of electronically manipulated vocal sounds, almost all derived from a recording of Cathy Berberian reading-performing the beginning of ‘chapter 11’, the so-

⁴ For example, it is discussed in music histories such as Griffiths (1981), Morgan (1991), Taruskin (2005).

⁵ This CD comes with the book: Veniero Rizzardi & Angela Ida De Benedictis (eds), *Nuova Music alla Radio: Esperienze allo Studio di Fonologia della RAI di Milano 1954 – 1959* (CIDIM/RAI, Italy, 2000). I thank Els van Swol (Donemus / Music Center the Netherlands) for offering me this book and CD.

⁶ There are the following releases of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* on CD:

- a version without the *ouverture* on the CD ACOUSMATRIX 7, BERIO / MADERNA, BVHaast CD 9109 (1991);
- a re-edited and restored version on the CD LUCIANO BERIO: MANY MORE VOICES. BMG 09026-68302-2 (1998), which claims to be a ‘world-premiere release’, in which *ouverture* and main section form one composition;
- the version that is a part of the radio documentary ‘Omaggio a Joyce: Documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico’, produced by Luciano Berio and Umberto Eco in 1958, in which the *ouverture* and the main section are put in different parts of the documentary and do not form one composition (released in 2000 on CD with the book by Rizzardi & De Benedictis, see above).

The sound quality of these three recordings differs remarkably.

Previously, there were several releases with and without the *ouverture* on LP.

Versions without the *ouverture* are not authorized by the composer (Scaldaferri 2000: 150–152n64).

Originally, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* is a composition for four-track magnetic tape (for four loudspeakers), initially realized in double stereo; for the radio documentary it was reduced to mono; on LP or CD it is in stereo (Scaldaferri 2000: 100, 126, 150n62, 150–152n64, 152n65; Berio 2000: 252). Flo Menezes published on CD (accompanying a book in Brazil in 1996) a recording of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* without *ouverture*. Berio commented that it would be better if the reading by Cathy Berberian were included in a next edition, because then one would understand the work better (Menezes 2005: 34).

⁷ BMG 09026-68302-2, see above.

called ‘Siren Chapter’, of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The composition starts with an unmodified recording of this reading, the *ouverture*. After these first two minutes, the rest of the composition consists of fragmented, manipulated and superimposed vocal sounds – often clearly recognisable excerpts from the *ouverture*. Despite extensive manipulation, Berberian’s specific vocal timbre and intonation is a distinctive feature of the composition.

V.2 The forgotten voice

Many sleeve notes and other texts about *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* are based on an essay Berio himself wrote about this composition, published in 1959. In ‘Poesia e musica – un’esperienza’ (‘Poetry and Music – an Experience’),⁸ Berio writes about some aspects of his ‘experience’ of working on *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*. In this essay, Berio relates Joyce’s text to the music, but writes almost nothing about the voice. He does not even mention whose voice it is; he only mentions ‘a female voice’ (Berio 2000: 238).⁹ Berio's essay suggests that the spoken text is a neutral extension of the written text.¹⁰ In Berio's text, only two male authors appear – Joyce and Berio – as the following indicates:

I made this experiment attempting a gradual, musical development of the verbal elements alone, as they were proposed by a female voice reading a poetic text. (Berio 2000: 238)

In particular, in this experience, the *phenomenon* was the recorded reading of the opening sentences of chapter 11 of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; the episode called *Sirens*. (Berio 2000: 238)

[...] my intention was only to develop the reading of Joyce’s text in a restricted field of possibilities dictated by the text itself [...] (Berio 2000: 254)

All is implicit in the joycean original [...] (Berio 2000: 248)

Thus, Berio places himself in the footsteps of Joyce. Many others follow Berio’s suggestion and conceive of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* as a pure development of Joyce’s text. Cathy Berberian’s name rarely surfaces in this context. For instance, Dreßen's extensive analysis of *Thema* does not even mention that there is a female voice: ‘the text becomes sound’ (Dreßen 1982: 45–46, 54). He analyses the

⁸ The original Italian version appeared in *Incontri Musicali: Quaderni internazionali di musica contemporanea* 3, Milano: Suvini Zerboni, 1959, pp. 98–110. It appeared in German (‘Musik und Dichtung – eine Erfahrung’) in *Darmstädter Beiträge zur neuen Musik* 2, 1959, pp. 36–45; and in French in *Contrechamps* 1, 1983 pp. 24–35. Here I use the text published in Italian and English (trans. Alessandra Petrina) in Rizzardi & De Benedictis (2000: 236–259); this text is a reproduction of the original with a few minor variations by the author. I use the English translation of this publication.

⁹ This disregard of Berberian is even more remarkable when one considers the fact that Berio and Berberian were married and often collaborated. This may suggest that this is an ideological disregard, not a personal one (I thank Pamela Karantonis for this remark).

¹⁰ Berio calls *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* ‘a transcription, transmutation and paraphrase of a text’ in a letter to Pierre Boulez, January 26, 1981; at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel (microfilm 072), quoted by Scaldaferrri (2000: 100).

composition without the *ouverture*. Although Berio considered the *ouverture* an essential part of the composition, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* has often been published on LP or CD without Berberian's unmodified reading¹¹ – this is in itself already a way of downplaying Berberian's contribution. Dreßen's analysis pivots on the transformation of language into music and vice versa.¹² This is the same theme as is central in Berio's essay about *Thema*.¹³

Agostino di Scipio (2005) explicitly analyses *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* based on the intentions of the composer as described in Berio's essay (Di Scipio 2005: 1). Di Scipio argues that the technical-compositional procedures of tape editing ('sound processing') are taken directly from literary procedures of 'word processing' in Joyce's text, and that an analysis must consider the position of Berio (and of his friend Umberto Eco, with whom Berio and Berberian studied Joyce's text) in relation to Joyce (Di Scipio 2005: 11). Although Di Scipio acknowledges the importance of Berberian's voice, he does not consider her voice in his analysis: Berberian's vocal rendering provides Berio with 'sound material', but the 'musical material' is in Joyce's chapter (Di Scipio 2005: 11). And while Marie Christine Vila (2003: 53–54, 72) argues convincingly that Cathy Berberian must have introduced Berio and Eco to Joyce, and also shows how Joyce's work remained important for her throughout her career, it is remarkable that Di Scipio only relates Berio and Eco to Joyce (based on

¹¹ Scaldaferrri (2000: 150n64).

Dreßen (1982: 278) refers to the recording on the LP Phi 836.897 DSY.

¹² Dreßen (1982) discerns a regular, almost symmetric form in *Thema*, in which the transitions of language into music/sound and vice versa are central. Dreßen (1982: 48–55) proposes the following scheme (without *ouverture*):

First part:	text to mixed; [0–1'00]
Middle part:	1. mixed to electronic; [1'00– 2'36] 2. text to electronic; [2'36–3'26] 3. mixed tot electronic; [3'26– 4'54]
Last part:	mixed to text. [4'54–end]

Some of Dreßen's boundaries between parts consist of a silence, but not all the silences in the piece mark a new part. Moreover, around Dreßen's boundaries there are recurring musical elements or motives, which seem to 'glue' the different parts together; for example the rhythmic /s/'s around the division between M1 and M2.

¹³ Dreßen stresses the importance of the speech sound /s/ as a pivot between language and music or sound: as 's' it belongs to language, but it can also heard as noise. Berio (2000) also stressed the dual character of the /s/ as both noise and linguistic sound.

remarks by Berio).¹⁴ Cathy Berberian comes into play when Di Scipio argues that Joyce's text functions for Berio as a Siren, incarnated by Cathy Berberian's voice (Di Scipio 2005: 7). Di Scipio even compares Berio with Ulysses himself (Di Scipio 2005: 8, 22). But while for Ulysses (Leopold Bloom in Joyce's text) the Siren's song is an invitation to abandonment and forgetfulness, Di Scipio argues that Berio-Ulysses responds to the Siren's song (Joyce's text) with an act of construction, keeping his own identity and responsibility for his own actions.¹⁵ However, Di Scipio also discerns in Bloom's listening the seeds for the act of decomposition–recomposition as practiced by Berio, who thus follows Joyce's suggestions.¹⁶

So we have the premise that in his own essay on *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Berio places himself in the footsteps of James Joyce. In other analyses of this composition, the expert-listener-musicologists follow Berio's suggestions and thus continue a patrilineal chain of Joyce – Berio – expert-listener-musicologist.¹⁷ Such a listener focuses on and identifies with the 'composer's voice', the imaginary composer's persona, as theorized by Edward Cone. 'To listen to music [...] is to make the composer's voice one's own.' (Cone 1974: 157) Instead of such identification with the male composer, I propose here to focus on the female voice.

¹⁴ Di Scipio (2005: 3, 18).

¹⁵ Berio and Eco do suggest this with their statement: 'This time, the song of the Sirens has not been an invitation to abandonment and oblivion. In fact, we have replied to it with a constructive exploit' in the radio documentary 'Omaggio a Joyce: Documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico', CD Rizzardi & Benedictis (see above), track 47, on which Di Scipio (2005: 8) elaborates.

¹⁶ By his 'non-linear' way of listening, Bloom produces an interior distance to the 'Siren's song' (Di Scipio 2005: 20–22).

Berio et Bloom réagissent tous les deux au chant de leurs sirènes respectives, en se prédisposant à l'écoute mais en la déformant à leur façon. Dans cette perspective, on dirait que *Berio est (refait) Bloom*. [...] *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* est l'écoute intérieure de Berio qui s'écoute en train de lire Joyce, et en train d'écouter son *Siren* (Joyce dans la voix de Berberian). (Di Scipio 2005: 22)

¹⁷ Another example of a discussion of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* that follows Berio and his article and that focuses on the relation of the composition to Joyce's *Ulysses*, is Bossis (2007).

V.3 The creative voice

The disregard of Berberian's voice in *Thema* is of specific importance in the light of Adriana Cavarero's (2005) investigation of the voice in philosophy.¹⁸ She shows how in the Western metaphysical tradition the voice has been devalued in favour of theory and other metaphors of vision. She argues that *logos* became devocalized from Plato on. Moreover, the split between language and voice is gendered: the voice and the body became feminine, while language and mind are gendered as masculine.

Feminized from the start, the vocal aspect of speech, and furthermore, of song appear together as antagonistic elements in a rational, masculine sphere that centers itself, instead, on the semantic. To put it formulaically: woman sings, man thinks. (Cavarero 2005: 6)

[I]n the (notoriously dichotomous) symbolic patriarchal order, man is conceived as mind and woman as body. The division of *logos* into a purely feminine *phone* and a purely masculine *semantikon*, finally, accomplishes and confirms the system. (Cavarero 2005: 107)

Cavarero proposes an alternative ontology based on the voice, in which the following related concepts are central: body, relations, singularity, plurality of voices, and resonance. Cavarero argues that the voice is never neutral or anonymous, but that it reveals the embodied uniqueness of the one who emits it.¹⁹ The voice implies 'a deep vitality of the unique being who takes pleasure in revealing herself through the emission of the voice' (Cavarero 2005: 4). 'What it communicates is precisely the true, vital, and perceptible uniqueness of the one who emits it.' (Cavarero 2005: 5)

Most writings on *Thema* fit into the metaphysical tradition criticized by Cavarero. Berio's essay, in contradiction with his ideal to 'purify once for all our musical habits from any dualistic residue' (Berio 2000: 256), shows a hierarchic dualism. A male composer, working with and writing about compositional and electro--acoustic technology, and a male writer both function as authors. The text of the male composer-author is silent regarding an anonymous female vocal artist, who functions as 'phenomenon' (Berio 2000: 238), as vocal material. By means of classification and electronic sound technology, the male composer creates 'a subtle distance from the

¹⁸ I thank Anne Sivuoja for recommending this book to me. See Cecconi (2005) and Smart (2005) for some critical reviews of this book, which criticize Cavarero's account of the operatic voice.

¹⁹ Kottman in Cavarero (2005: XVIII).

natural, conventional aspects of a speaking voice' (Berio 2000: 248). In Berio's essay, the male author-composer highlights issues of composition technique; he does not write about the female voice.

Onomatopoeia in Joyce's work was the theme of the radio documentary by Berio and Eco that initiated *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, named *Omaggio a Joyce: Documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico*. They state:

There is a moment in the existence of a language when the word, prior to any conventional usage, becomes one with the object it denominates: this is the moment of onomatopoeia, in which the object acquires an almost tangible apparency through the sounds that suggest it. Initially, onomatopoeia is nothing but an irresistible instinct for imitation, almost a need to reproduce nature.²⁰

And they give examples such as 'the voice of a negro' and 'the calls of American Indians that perfectly match the songs of the birds'. In the radio documentary, Berio and Eco associate onomatopoeia with instinct, unawareness, reproduction, nature, non-Western people and women – these are others of masculine rationality. Again, gendered dualism is at stake.

An alternative is suggested by Derek Attridge (1988). In relation to the Siren Chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, he argues that onomatopoeia is not a natural imitation of extra-linguistic referential sounds but an artificial language game. Readers do not pronounce the phonemes of onomatopoeia in an automatic, instinctive way, but show vocal inventiveness when interpreting the onomatopoeia, related to the context, grammar and rules of the art of onomatopoeia itself and their knowledge of the referred sounds. The unusual onomatopoeia of Joyce's Siren Chapter especially intrigue and challenge the reader. According to Attridge:

[T]o respond to onomatopoeia of any kind it is necessary to have learned how to do so, because it means overriding the normal procedures of language comprehension [...]. O]nomatopoeia requires *interpretation* as much as any other system of signs does [...]. Reading a literary text is not a 'natural' activity[.] (Attridge 1988: 141)

Difficulty in pronunciation according to the normal rules of English may also encourage the reader's inventiveness [...]. M]ost readers probably take the unpronounceability of 'Mrkrgrnao!' as an invitation to imitate a cat's cry in a way less stylized than the conventional 'Miaow!' [...]. T]he extraordinary sequence of letters clearly gives the reader more scope for a bravura performance and in so doing provides greater pleasure[.] (Attridge 1988: 147)

²⁰ Text of the recording in Rizzardi & De Benedictis (2000: 340), trans. Anne Prina Ricotti.

Thus, onomatopoeia is not an automatic, natural mimesis of the extra-linguistic sound to which it refers; it is always related to the rules of language and to the rules of the art of onomatopoeia. The pleasure of onomatopoeia is, among others, that it invites the reader to interpret, to play with the vocal sounds and vocal organs and to go beyond the rules of normal language.

In his essay, Berio writes that with the help of electronic technology he created a subtle distance from the ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ aspects of a speaking voice. Taking the ‘immediate musicality’ of the vocal text as the main basis for the composition would, according to Berio, limit the composition ‘to the field of onomatopoeia’, which, according to Berio, represents the most elementary stage of spontaneous musical expression (Berio 2000: 242). However, following Attridge, we can infer that especially in regard to the onomatopoeia, Berberian’s reading is already far removed from ‘natural’ speaking and is rather a sophisticated vocal play.

Ivan Fónagy (1983) argues that actors and orators are artists. Even the most faithful interpretation transforms the written work. Delivering a text aloud is never a neutral reading. The vocalisation of a text implies many meaningful choices.²¹ Fónagy studied various strategies of ‘vocal creation’ and analysed different vocal interpretations of the same text.²² A spoken text differs from a written text: added are intonations, rhythms, pauses, timbres, etc. A written text can partly suggest some of these elements, but there is always an enormous free space left for its creative vocal performance.

Indeed, in her large monograph *Luciano Berio: Chemins en musique* (1985), musicologist Ivanka Stoianova²³ reveals the insights of those who do mention

²¹ As Ivan Fónagy states:

L’acteur, le récitant sont des artistes dont l’art consiste à transmettre une oeuvre verbale; c’est en passant inaperçus qu’ils s’acquittent le mieux de leur tâche, permettant ainsi à l’auditeur une confrontation directe avec l’oeuvre poétique. Mais le mot *transmission*, comme le mot *traduction*, est trompeur. Transmettre, “interpréter” une oeuvre, ce n’est pas la mettre entre les mains du public, comme le fait, avec le livre, le vendeur de librairie. L’interprétation, même la plus fidèle, transforme et remanie – sans le vouloir – l’oeuvre interprétée [...] [L]a réalisation de chaque phonème suppose un choix multiple et tout choix est significatif. (Fónagy 1983: 316)

²² ‘La création vocale’ is a term of Fónagy (1983: 235).

²³ This large overview of Berio’s oeuvre (500+ p.), in which the French-Bulgarian musicologist discusses the main trends in his work as well as individual compositions, is supplemented by many quotes of Berio and others around him who were interviewed by Stoianova. The book won the Prix de l’Académie Charles Cros for the best book on music in the French language in 1985.

Berberian's special role in the making of *Thema* (Stoianova 1985: 148–157).²⁴ Umberto Eco, who was present at the recording, remembers that Berberian read 'The Sirens' in English, playing with the onomatopoeia and rhythms in an admirable way.²⁵ Berberian herself stresses her creative role: how to read the text was her decision.²⁶ Berberian's reading-performing of the Siren Chapter was not a neutral rendering of the written text, but a creative act.

In the *ouverture*, it is possible to hear that Berberian's reading is a performance, a play, in which she delivers an exceptionally lively and musical interpretation of the text. This becomes clearer when one compares her reading with the readings of others in the radio documentary – and Eco's remark about her admirable reading suggests a similar evaluation. But in his essay, Berio relates these differences in quality to the different languages, not to the exceptional vocal creativity of Berberian:

But the French text was read by two voices, one female and one male, put together to compensate, thanks to the different vocal timbres, that degree of discontinuity and onomatopoeic effectiveness that is undoubtedly more present in the English language. As for Italian, even less suitable on this level, we used three different voices. (Berio 2000: 244)

Again, Berio's neglect of Berberian's vocal creativity is notable.

When listening to *Thema*, it is impossible not to hear Cathy Berberian's voice. Some of Berberian's original vocalising even kept its specific character in the main section, although the voice is processed, fragmented, cut into pieces, and recomposed into estranged combinations. Without her specific voice, the composition would have been substantially different. But this is not only because the voice is the revelation of the uniqueness of the one who emits it, as Cavarero argues; Berberian's voice is first of all

²⁴ In an interview with Rossana Dalmonte, Berio does mention the voice of Berberian in relation to *Sequenza III*, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, *Circles* and *Visage*, as a 'second Studio of phonology' ('des oeuvres qui sont toutes liées à la voix de Cathy Berberian, laquelle a été pour moi une sorte de second Studio de phonologie'). *Luciano Berio: Entretiens avec Rossana Dalmonte*, trans. Martin Kaltenecker (Paris 1983; orig. 1981: 125).

David Osmond-Smith mentions Berberian's share: '[Berio] recorded Berberian's marvellously apt reading of it' (Osmond-Smith 1991: 61).

²⁵ U. Eco in Stoianova: "'...Cathy lisait 'Les Sirènes' en anglais, en faisant jouer les onomatopées et tous les rythmes de façon admirable.'" (Stoianova 1985: 150).

²⁶ "'[Berio] m'a donné le texte de Joyce et c'était à moi de décider comment le lire.'" (Stoianova 1985: 150).

remarkable as a creative act. Another voice would not only have revealed another unique being, but also would have had another artistic quality, with other artistic consequences for the composition. Berberian not only was passively revealed by her voice: she actively created vocal art. Cavarero, however, does not conceive of vocalization as action, as Kottman points out (in Cavarero 2005: xxi–xxv). Kottman contrasts Cavarero’s ontology of the voice with Hannah Arendt’s politics of action. Action is not forced by necessity but is the impulse to initiate, to begin something new.

‘Action’ [...] is not a given – like the sheer fact of the voice’s singularity or the uniqueness of one’s own embodiment. Being born with ‘a voice like no other’ does not, in the end, guarantee or determine the actions performed by that singular voice. (Kottman in Cavarero 2005: xxv)

The musical practices of Cathy Berberian and of other creative vocalists show that the voice is more than a metaphor for a new ontology: vocalisation is a creative act. Cathy Berberian’s voice reveals a vocal artist who initiated new ways of vocal performance.

V.4 The Siren's voice

But there are more ways in which the female voice is central to *Thema*. This composition is not only a record of Cathy Berberian's exceptional vocal creativity. *Thema* is not only made of and with a female voice – it is also a composition *about* the female voice. This is already suggested by the choice of the 'Siren Chapter' from James Joyce's *Ulysses*; as well as by the fact that the composition consists entirely of the sounds of a female voice and that the transformation of vocal sounds into non-vocal sounds and vice versa is an essential feature of this work.

Referring to *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* Paul Griffiths remarks that '[i]nvariably one is tempted to interpret the breakdown of the text as a metaphor of mental disintegration' (Griffiths 1979: 38). Such an interpretation of non-verbal female vocal sound resonates with myths about the female voice that circulate in opera, film, psychoanalysis and other cultural realms, as discussed by Kaja Silverman, Michel Poizat and others (see below). And, indeed, it is possible to interpret *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* in this way, as I will do here.

One could divide the main section of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (after the *ouverture*) into three parts. The first part (2'00–2'25) and the last minute (7'06–end) are relatively calm and simple, with many intelligible words and relatively few electronic manipulations. The larger middle part has a more hectic character, with a denser texture, many short staccato sounds and few intelligible words.

In the first part of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*'s main section, the musical texture is relatively simple and accessible. The female voice utters words like:

a veil
a sail
far far
[save]
a veil awave
throstle fluted
the spiked winding cold silent Liszt's [ssssssssss]
I feel
so lonely
blooming
Liszt's rhapsodies [ssssssss] ²⁷

²⁷ These words and their spelling are as cited in Berio's essay (Berio 2000). Words / speech sounds between parentheses are not in this original but are an artefact of the composition. In the original text,

The intonation of the words suggests expectation, not closure, as in an unfinished sentence or a continuing story. The words suggest distance (a veil covering something, a veil waving towards someone far away, a sail far away, far far), coldness and loneliness. (The association of Ulysses sailing at a distance from the Sirens comes to the fore.) Together with the promising, attractive and mysterious tone of the voice, desire, attraction and distance is suggested. The voice beckons to come.

From 2'25 on, the music gets more and more excited and confusing, with mostly short, fragmented, isolated and repeated words. It ends with 'war'. Then, at 2'58, glissando's of streams of quick repetitive sounds – sharp chirruping electronic sounds – are combined with a swarm of short, staccato, fragmented words, with sometimes a short accentuated electronic sound.²⁸ There are ups and downs in intensity. The voice is disintegrated and often drowned by the electronic sound. At 3'55, a clear, stammering 'so lonely' is followed by clusters of wild, hectic sounds. One can hear: '[more and more]'. Then, 4'30–5'30: soft 'sssss' and 'soft word' – this part is relatively calm with few words; varied and multi-layered, and less wild, less aggressive and less dense; with resonating, echoing voice sounds (as in an indoor swimming-pool or cave) and with melancholic long and low blowing sounds (at 5'00 and 5'02), like a foghorn. Then, at 5'30 fast, accelerated voices are followed by a swarm of agitated, staccato, unintelligible voice fragments. Clearly discernible is the word 'morbida', an Italian word in female form meaning 'soft'. 'Far' and 'war' are also discernible; chirruping sounds, some echoing sounds. At 6'05, wild stormy noise bands drown the voice sounds until 6'50. Then a less dense texture with unintelligible words leads to the last minute.

At 7'06, the voice utters calmly and warmly intelligible words. The words or word groups mostly have a descending intonation, accompanied by some calm, low tones. Some resonating, echoing vocal sounds are reminders of the wild middle part.

'sssss' is a part of 'hissss'. Due to montage and other electroacoustic manipulations, the sequence and frequency of the understandable words in the main section of the composition vary greatly from the original text / recording and many sounds are not recognizable as (parts of) words.

²⁸ Since all sounds are derived from the recording of voice, strictly speaking none of these sounds is 'electronic'. However, some sound like voice sounds, others sound like electronic sounds.

soft word
soft word
alas
listen
each and for other plash
and silent roar
Liszt's rhapsodies
hisssss
so sad
pearls
hisssss
when she
soft word
roar
alas
Liszt's
hisssss
and soft word
other plash
listen
far
war
hisssss
soft word
listen
when she
hisssss

Words, timbre and intonation suggest distance and a melancholic acquiescence.

The Sirens are notorious for their pure vocality, their dangerous wordless singing. Following this association, one could interpret the main section of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* as follows:

- I) Odysseus is still far away from the Sirens, hearing their invitation;

- II) coming in confusing proximity, a fight or war, aggressive voices coming out of a wild sea of sound, voices being drowned by noise, in the middle also some mysterious musical sounds, slightly more structured, and then again agitated voice sounds, drowned by swamping noise;

- III) past it, being far away again, now melancholic and acquiescent.

<i>ouverture</i>	0'00–2'00	unmodified voice
I	2'00–2'25/2'58	simple and quiet, words, -invitation/attraction-
II	2'58–4'30	noisy, fragmented words, -confusion-
	4'30–5'30	more calm, varied, no words, -eye of the storm-
	5'30–7'06	fast, accelerated fragmented words, noise bands, -storm-
III	7'06–8'12	calm, simple, quiet, words, -melancholic-

In I) and III) language is related to pleasant, quiet distance. In II) non-verbal vocal sounds are set in a noisy, confusing environment.

There are two main cultural fictions regarding the valuation of non-verbal vocal sound. It is often suggested that the young child in its pre-discursive phase lives in phenomenological fullness and directness, enveloped by the mother's voice. Some provide a positive interpretation of this situation as 'pleasurable milieu', 'bath of sounds' or 'sonorous envelope', that 'which surrounds, sustains, and cherishes the child'.²⁹ On the other hand, Kaja Silverman (1988) finds negative versions of the 'maternal voice fantasy' in Michel Chion's book *La voix au cinéma* (1982) and in dominant cinema. Chion (1999: 61, 62) describes the situation of the baby as being in an 'umbilical web'; the voice could be 'a nurturing connection, allowing no chance of autonomy to the subject trapped in its umbilical web'. In the negative version of the pre-symbolic situation, the impotence of the baby is stressed, not its phenomenological plenitude: 'Trapped within the suffocating confinement of the mother's voice, the newborn child resembles a prisoner or a prey' (Silverman 1988: 75). The baby's situation is often associated with and projected on the mother's voice, as Silverman shows. This leads to a projection of discursive impotence on the female voice, on female personae and on women in general,

²⁹ Kaja Silverman (1988: 72) refers to Guy Rosolato, Mary Ann Doane and Didier Anzieu. See also Dame (1994: 70).

as in classic Hollywood film and in 19th century opera, in which the female cry is of central importance.³⁰

‘The cry’ is the exemplary non-linguistic vocal sound. In opera or in film, this cry is often a diegetic cry of fear by a female character; but in general ‘the cry’ stands for any non-verbal vocal sound, which can be frightening or alluring. According to Michel Poizat, the verbal utterances serve as a contrast to highlight the translinguistic vocal sounds.

[I]t is not in unintelligibility itself that lyric *jouissance* resides but in the progressive dissolution of meaning under the effect of a logic of musical composition that then escapes the logic of verbal expression. Now this effect is all the stronger, by contrast, when intelligibility is properly ensured wherever the composer has decided, consciously or not, to have it respected. (Poizat 1992: 45)

Poizat (1992: 150) links the Sirens with the figure of Woman, Voice and Death, and the inaccessible, impossible vocal object. This lost vocal object is the hypothetical pure cry, when the young child might not yet be embedded in the symbolic order of language and the cry might not yet have any meaning, but the mother might have a perfect response to it. This lost pure voice becomes the object of a drive. The vocal object is ambivalent: it is the object of the desire for pure, immediate, fully present voice – but it is inherently lost.³¹ The vocal object is desirable but dangerous: the listening subject would lose himself and ‘die’ in the pureness, immediacy and presence of the vocal object, devoid of any meaning. Distance, difference, absence, loss and lack are inherent in language. Signifiers as well as signifieds are defined by their differences. Language is distinct from direct sensory reality: a word is not the thing to which it refers; when one hears meaning, one does not hear pure sound. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the acquisition of language is related to the castration complex: to enter the symbolic order is to leave the realm of phenomenal plenitude.³² However, this loss is based on a fantasy. The entry into the symbolic order produces the desire for the supposedly-lost object.

The ambivalence of the vocal object accounts for the above-mentioned strong negative or positive valuations of non-verbal vocal sound. Such a negative representation

³⁰ See also Chapter II and III.

³¹ For the Lacanian vocal object, as discussed by Poizat (1992), see also section VI.1 in the next chapter.

³² See Silverman (1988) for an elaboration of this Lacanian semiotic point of view.

of a non-verbal female voice can be discerned in the main section of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*. The musical environment of the words in the first and last parts is clear, pleasant and attractive. The words themselves give a relative structure or order, and there are few disturbing, unusual sounds or noises. On the other hand, in the middle part, disintegrated language goes together with disharmonic, noisy, seemingly unstructured sound suggesting a fight or war: aggressive voices coming out of a wild sea of sound, voices being drowned by noise, agitated vocal sounds, drowned by swamping noise. This musical setting seems to affirm Griffith's association with 'mental disintegration'.

V.5 Odysseus, the Sirens, voice and technology

Griffiths states that in Western music, singing without words is rare, because ‘to have a singer mouthing unintelligible words would be to invite the danger of absurdity’ (Griffiths 1979: 36). But this restriction does not apply to tape music, because ‘the unseen singer no longer need[s] to behave with rational decorum’ (Griffiths 1979: 36). Thus, electro-vocal tape music facilitated the development of live performed non-verbal vocal music.³³

It is arguable that Berio's *Sequenza III* for solo voice (1965) would not have been possible if its meaningless sounds had not been legitimized by earlier electronic pieces, notably those of Berio himself. (Griffiths 1979: 36)

With the help of technology, the vocal abject,³⁴ the ambivalent repulsion of the non-verbal female voice, seems less threatening.

Odysseus did something similar: he was able to listen to the singing of the Sirens by means of a rational trick. Etty Mulder (1994) elaborates on Horkheimer & Adorno (1987; orig. 1944/1947), who consider the stratagem of Odysseus as the first act of the rationalising mind in Western history. The singing of the Sirens is alluring and dangerous; giving in to this female attraction leads to the death of the male sailors. According to Horkheimer & Adorno, the death caused by the Sirens is the death of subjectivity and of egocentric consciousness; it is a fatal regression into an archaic state of consciousness, Mulder stresses. Odysseus is warned about the fatal Sirens; but, Mulder remarks, instead of avoiding them by taking another route, he wants to listen to them without having to die. And he succeeds by devising a rational trick: he puts wax in the ears of his sailors and lets himself be chained to the mast. Now Odysseus can hear the Sirens without coming in fatal proximity to them. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom has a similar position, Di Scipio argues: he wants to deliver himself to the

³³ This line of reasoning does not acknowledge the influence of, among others, the dadaïst sound poetry from the beginning of the 20th century by Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, and others. Nevertheless, for the further development of sound poetry in the second half of this century, the tape recorder was also of crucial importance. Another example of earlier artistic non-verbal vocalising is scat singing in vocal jazz, which also originates from the beginning of the 20th century.

³⁴ For the female voice as abject, see Dame (1994: 80–87).

singing of the Sirens without giving up his freedom; he wants to participate and stay at a distance at the same time.³⁵

Mulder and Horkheimer & Adorno compare this warding off of the power of the Sirens' singing with the submission and objectification of nature by the rational human mind of the Enlightenment. According to Horkheimer & Adorno, the process of rationalisation leads to a destruction of nature. But Mulder interprets Odysseus' trick in a more positive way. She opens up the possibility that the Sirens survived. She asks how the Sirens sung after Odysseus sailed away, and suggests that they could emerge any time from behind a piece of music (Mulder 1994: 42). Odysseus makes an overwhelming listening experience possible without having to die and without silencing the singing of the Sirens. He created the conditions for his own temporal self-abandonment. The singing of the Sirens as well as Odysseus' subjectivity can both survive.

The equation of the feminine with nature, with the male ratio as its master, is a common stereotype. It is significant that Mulder, in her interpretation, does not let the female Sirens disappear. She also states that Odysseus projects his own feeling of being fatally attracted onto the singing of the Sirens. It is not the Sirens who are dangerous; the danger is in Odysseus himself (Mulder 1994: 41). Mulder stresses that Odysseus not only tries to gain control over the dangerous singing of the Sirens, he also tries to retain 'his object "the primordial mother and her voice"'.³⁶ She suggests that he keeps this object as a memory, as an introjection. By experiencing the voices of the Sirens without coming too near, Odysseus strengthens his self-consciousness and identity.

Thema (Omaggio a Joyce) was made in the early days of electro-acoustic music. At the time of its composition, the discourse about avant-garde music was modernist: it was concerned with control, analysis, distance from tradition and the invention of systems. Serialism, a rational, invented system for composition, was of central interest.³⁷ Essays by Karlheinz Stockhausen and Milton Babbitt, among others, exemplify a belief

³⁵ Bloom semble s'abandonner au chant des sirènes, sans renoncer pour autant à sa liberté. Il veut participer (« être une partie ») et en même temps, il veut rester à l'écart, en dehors. C'est en cela que son caractère est « odysseén ». Et c'est pourquoi Joyce l'appelle « unconquered hero » (p. 340), précisément comme le héros d'Homère. (Di Scipio 2005: 20.)

³⁶ Mulder (1994: 40); my translation.

³⁷ With 'serialism' I do not (only) refer to twelve-tone technique or dodecaphony but mainly to what is also called integral, total, general or multiple serialism, that is the use of series of various musical parameters.

that electronic sound technology could be the means for a total control of the musical results. In his writings, Berio distances himself from a theoretical, systematic serialism. But the method of de-composition, analysis and re-synthesis or re-composition, which he described in his essay on *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (Berio 2000), is related to serialism. Berio's references to Odysseus, whose stratagem can be considered as the first act of the rational mind, and to a female voice that functions as 'material', also fit into this context

According to Mulder's interpretation, Odysseus' rational trick does not destroy the Sirens; it protects him and makes it possible for him to introject their singing. Likewise, the electronic sound technology in *Thema* does not destroy the female voice. Cavarero (2005) ignores the recording of voice – a remarkable omission. The recorded voice opens up the possibility of voice as *écriture*, and supplements Derrida's account of the voice as the antipode of writing.³⁸ A vocal recording favours dissemination and re-interpretation.

Cathy Berberian's voice in *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* is a feminine voice: alluring and partly non-verbal. But, unlike in the stereotypical narratives of opera and film, this voice does not die. While Mulder argues that Odysseus has kept the voice of the Sirens as an introjection in his psyche (as a memory), on the other hand in *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* the female voice is externalized, objectified and incorporated into an electro-acoustic artwork; as such it is an even more enduring, autonomous force than Mulder's Sirens. This artwork has become separate from both the original female vocal subject (Cathy Berberian) and the original male listening-composing subject (Luciano Berio). That way, the call of the Sirens is not a private experience of a male hero anymore; everyone can listen to, interpret and introject the work of Berberian and Berio in one's own way, and share this with others.

³⁸ In *De la grammatologie* (1967) and other publications, Derrida deconstructed the ideology of full presence in which writing is considered merely a derivative of speech and voice. See Chapter VII and VIII.

V.6 Another listening experience

An incentive to interpret *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* differently could come from Cavarero's historical account of the myth of the Sirens. The myth that the Sirens sing wordless cries is a later development:

In the tradition that runs from the Romans to the present day, the Sirens in fact tend to embody the lethality of a pure, harmonious, powerful, and irresistible voice that is almost like an animal cry. Half woman, half beast, they represent a vocal expression that is 'different' from the humanized sphere of the *phone semantike*. (Cavarero 2005: 103)

Originally, in Homer's account, the Sirens narrate by singing, their song is a tale, they vocalize stories. And they see and know all. The Sirens were recounting to Odysseus his own story (Cavarero 2005: 115). Only later did the Sirens undergo a fate similar to the cultural fiction of the female voice in general: they became wordless-singing, crying creatures. This comes with a division between (masculine) meaningful speech/language on the one hand, and (feminine) meaningless, embodied, 'pure' vocal sound on the other hand.

The fact that the voice is a pure vocality that says nothing further assures an extraneousness to the semantic dimension of logos that only increases the feminine nature of the voice itself. In other words, in the (notoriously dichotomous) symbolic patriarchal order, man is conceived as mind and woman as body. The division of logos into a purely feminine *phone* and a purely masculine *semantikon*, finally, accomplishes and confirms the system. (Cavarero 2005: 107)

This division is not neutral, but brings with it a hierarchy of man above woman, rooted in the association of the voice with the mother:

[T]he devocalization of logos appears as yet another figure of the symbolic matricide of which patriarchal culture leaves many transparent traces. (Cavarero 2005: 208)

The above interpretation of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* perhaps too easily follows this patriarchal association of: linguistic disintegration – mental disintegration – female meaningless vocal sound – Sirens. What other ways are there to interpret this work?

In *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, the female voice not only utters disintegrated sounds in a disturbing, noisy environment. She also utters the words. The verbal parts of *Thema* (the *ouverture* and the beginning and end of the main section) are a framework for the more confusing, disordered, disintegrated middle part. And this framework

consists of a female voice. In this respect, it is different from nineteenth century opera or Hollywood film, because in these genres the female voice is tonally, linguistically and narratively framed by male voices or personae.³⁹

Berberian's voice is incorporated in the composition and speaks in it. And, since all the non-verbal vocal sounds are derived from the recording of her delivery of a literary text, it shows that this mythical, primordial feminine non-linguistic vocal sound is not something completely other, but is related to language. As such, it could be an illustration of Cavarero's political ideal of the interweaving of voice and speech as the essence of humanity:

For a radical rethinking of the classical connection between speech and politics, especially from a feminist perspective, recuperating the theme of the voice is therefore an obligatory strategic gesture. It is not a matter of feminizing politics; nor is it a question of making politics coincide with the pure voice by insisting on the subversive power of vocal pleasure. Rather, it is a matter of tracing speech back to its vocalic roots, extricating speech at the same time from the binary economy that splits the vocalic from the semantic and divides them into the two genders of the human species. (Cavarero 2005: 207)

[T]he speech that sacrifices the voice to the universal laws of the semantic remains imprisoned by metaphysics – and, at the same time, the voice that sacrifices speech to the subversive effects of an absolute pleasure risks crossing the threshold of the animal realm. [...] Which means that the interweaving of voice and speech, which is not necessarily synchronous, cannot be severed without sacrificing humanity itself; this goes for both the animal voice and the devocalized logos. (Cavarero 2005: 209–210)

One can superficially typify the middle part of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* as noisy and disordered. But listening to the details of this composition reveals much more. There are not only noise bands, but also subtle combinations of sounds. The piece has no clearly perceivable orderly structure, but there are recurring and varied motives in its changing texture. This is specially so for 4'30–5'30, which is musically differentiated and varied, with a variety of sounds forming various streams. The middle of the composition suggests that, when we listen carefully, non-verbal vocal sound does not have to be disordered and confusing – like the cry – but can also be varied, interesting and pleasant.

In the end, the wild sea of non-linguistic sound is left behind for intelligible words. Loss and distance are inherent to these words, according to the Lacanian theories about language and the cry described above. Loss and distance are also suggested by the words themselves ('alas ... so sad ... far ...') and by the association with Odysseus'

³⁹ See McClary (1991) and Silverman (1988).

journey, now past the seductive Sirens. The tone is calm, acquiescent and sad. The sound of this voice is wonderful, and some beautiful non-verbal semi-vocal sounds are still present. Something is lost but it is partly incorporated: pure vocal sound, without any significance, may be impossible, but we can still hear sound in linguistic utterances.⁴⁰ The female voice and the voice as sound do not have to be banished to abjection, to a dying female persona, to madness or to the translinguistic realm. ‘Soft words’, ‘listen...’

⁴⁰ This corresponds with the Lacanian notion of *lalangue*: with an inner divergence instead of a separation between signifier and voice; so that there is enjoyment in speech, not beyond (Dolar 2006: 144–145). Dolar calls Joyce ‘the author of *lalangue* if ever there was one’ (Dolar 2006: 149).