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The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music

Bosma, H.M.

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IX

TO CONCLUDE

Studies on gender issues in electroacoustic music are sparse. Therefore, I have looked at neighbouring disciplines such as feminist musicology, gender and technology studies, women's studies, cultural analysis and film studies for inspiration and background. My focus was on the music, and its surroundings, rather than biographical accounts of female composers. My initial question was how to find gender *in* electroacoustic music. In this respect, the combination of voice and electronics provided to be an entry into gender issues: for voices mostly have, or seem to have, a sex; there are many female voices in the otherwise male-dominated field of music technology and composition. Equally, the voice can provide a link to gender issues in for instance opera, film, literature and psychoanalysis.

Chapter I brings to the fore that the modernist, objectivist, formalist and technical discourse, often found in the electroacoustic music world, can be considered masculine. Instead of advocating the opposite, a subjective discourse, I aim to overcome this dual opposition by a dialogical approach between theory and analysis, where the music is not purely object but allowed 'to speak back' from within an explicit theoretical framing. Precise references, instead of generalisations, show both respect for the music and for the reader as well as providing accountability; and this, together with giving evidence, reasons or explanations, contributes to intersubjectivity. Another aspect of my approach is the de-centralisation of authorship, both bracketing and analysing the position of the author, beyond 'the death of the author', and shifting the attention towards other subject positions such as the vocalist and the listener. Here, I will summarize how this dialogical approach and the de-centralisation of the author have been elaborated in each of the preceding chapters.

What role does this dialogical approach play in Chapter II? In this chapter, I have dealt with (recordings of) compositions as objects, i.e., they were counted and roughly categorized according to superficial features: gender of the composer; gender

of the voice; singing, speaking or other; with or without language. However, the dialogue with the material takes place at other levels. At the start, the research question and the approach were partly suggested by the music in advance. Going through a large collection of electroacoustic music CDs, I noticed that there seemed to be many compositions for female voice and electronics, and I couldn't find one for male singing voice and electronics. At the same time, however, there were other compositions that somehow seemed to resist this categorisation. I decided to check this systematically in an accountable and precise way; the result of which is Chapter II. In the course of my systematic verification, it became clear that, indeed, such a gender pattern is discernible, albeit with some nuance. Some gender patterns are quite straightforwardly discernible in the examined body of compositions:

- The are far more male than female composers;
- There are no compositions for live singing male vocalist, all live singing vocalists are female; virtually all female vocalists sing with a substantial amount of non-verbal vocalising, mostly in Western extended classical style;
- The few live male vocalists perform with a speaking voice.

At first glance, as far as the pre-recorded voices are concerned, there seems to be a much larger variety and no straightforward gender patterns stand out. However, when focusing more closely on the individual compositions, some gender patterns of the prerecorded voices come to the fore:

- The pre-recorded voices are more varied than the live voices;
- The pre-recorded female voices show a large amount of professional vocalising, specifically recorded for the composition: singing in a Western extended classical style or reciting texts by others;
- The pre-recorded male voices are different from the female pre-recorded voices in that they seldom sing professionally, are mostly speaking voices, sometimes theatrical; often they are either 'found objects', i.e. samples from political speeches or radio/television broadcasts; or the voice of a cultural authority, or of the composer himself;
- The pre-recorded singing male voices are mostly voices of Others, i.e. non-Western or computer voices, or 'found objects' such as historical recordings and popular song.

In pre-recorded electronic music ('tape music') a gender pattern of location similar to that in the mixed genre for vocalist and electronics is reflected, albeit somewhat less clear: composers are far more often male than female, whilst women are predominantly involved in the production as a vocalist, whether performing on a concert stage or in a studio during the production process. This gender pattern matches with a stereotypical gender pattern that pervades the general culture and which typically associates woman to body, performance, tradition, non-verbal sound and singing, and man to technology, innovation, language and authority, i.e. relating masculinity to mind and femininity to body. Once these gender patterns were thus established, I used these as a reference for further close analysis of individual pieces in the subsequent chapters.

Listening to such a large collection of recordings, already gave me many ideas for the following chapters. Indeed, listening to such interesting music which precipitated many links to gender issues, and then do nothing more than carry out a mere count, was at times difficult; thus, while doing the research of Chapter II, I also took notes as input for further research. Chapter III is partly the result of this impatience: it is intended as an illustration and preview that relates the gender patterns found in Chapter II to broader cultural issues (as found in Lacanian accounts of opera and film) and that anticipates the more in-depth analyses in the following chapters. Embodiment and its relation to (disem)power(ment) and authority are central to Chapter III: the power, authority and embodiment of the female vocalist and the twisted voices of authority of the disembodied male voices. The gender patterns in electro-vocal music do not just replicate the more general gender patterns of our broader culture; although the patterns found in Chapter II do relate to these general patterns, a closer consideration of some electro-vocal compositions and performances in the other chapters reveals some particular twists to the gendered stereotypes, as if these specific musical instances 'talk back' to the general stereotypes.

As for the role of the author: the intentions of the composers do not play any role in Chapter II, nor are the composers considered to be autonomous geniuses. In Chapter II, composers are mere names, short biographical notes and some photo's – enough information to assess their gender. The composer is part of a pattern: the combination of male composer and female vocalist. This abstract duo subsequently becomes central to more detailed analyses of individual compositions, as is the case in

Chapter IV (the vocal persona, the 'composer's voice', and the relation of the live female voice to the tape in *Philomel*, *Anima* and *Hildegard's Dream*) and in Chapter V (the relation of Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian in and around *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*). In Chapter III, the performance of a female vocalist is contrasted with the written intentions of the male composer (Janice Jackson's performance of Jean-Claude Risset's *L'autre face*). But with regard to Wende Bartley's *Ellipsis*, my account shows a different relation between composer, vocalist and vocality. Part of the composition is formed by a collaboration between the composer and the vocalist Fides Krucker. Moreover, the composer also used her own vocal experiences for the composition.

In Chapter IV, three close analyses of compositions for live female vocalist and tape are framed by a focus on the relation of the female vocal persona to the electronic persona and the composer's voice, based on a critical account of Edward Cone's analytical concepts. I am not simply following or applying Cone's analytical approach, but reacting to it, as if in a dialogue. Cone brackets the composer (author), but still prioritizes the metaphorical 'composer's voice', which is a construction of the listener evoked by the composition. I shift the analytical attention from the (male) composer's voice towards the (female) vocal persona. In the compositions discussed in this chapter, the tape parts are closely related to the vocal personae. The tape parts are not unitary but contain sounds from different domains, such as electronic sounds and pre-recorded vocal sounds. I do not consider these tape parts as the direct component of the composer's voice: the tape parts often seem an extension of the vocal parts. But the vocal part may not be a separate vocal persona either, inasmuch as it seems an extension of the tape part. When the vocal part and the tape part merge, the vocalist's and the composer's voice merge. Although both the composer's voice and the vocal persona are abstract constructions, I do consider these gendered, because of the strong gender patterns of male composers and female vocalists, and because of the genders of the actual composers and vocalists of these compositions. The merging of vocal persona and composer's voice may thus be considered as gender bending. So on the one hand Cone's concepts are productive for the analyses of these compositions, but on the other hand, by these analyses, Cone's concepts are transformed.

A female vocalist is also central to Chapter V, again in relation to a male composer, however, now not with regard to a live vocal part but a pre-recorded voice. I set out with the composer and vocalist as constructed by the texts about the composition, the con-texts. I analyse how vocalist Cathy Berberian is as it were written out of the composition *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* by means of an essay of composer Luciano Berio and, subsequently, by accounts of others often based on the composer's theoretical framing. My analysis, per contra, takes Berberian's vocality as point of departure. I argue that Berberian's specific voice is essential for the composition, and thus may not deemed to be just 'a voice' or 'a female voice'. Moreover, it has been suggested (by Berberian and others), that her influence was quintessential for the genesis of the composition. In my musical analysis I focus on the gender pattern of 'crying' female non-verbal voice sounds, as is common in Western classical opera and film. At first, my analysis is an elaboration of this stereotypical pattern: the breakdown of language in the middle section of the piece is composed in a musically quasi-chaotic, noisy setting, while, by contrast the clear words in the beginning and at the end sound pleasant and quiet. I could have stopped here, classifying this composition as again another example of the association of female non-verbal voice sounds with chaos, danger and disintegration. However, I go one step further, driven by the richness I perceive in this composition and in dialogue with theoretical texts by Etty Mulder and Adriana Cavarero that give an alternative account of the mythological Sirens. It then emerges that this female voice represents both non-verbal transgression *and* a verbal framework. Moreover, through the musical relations between its different sections, the composition shows that 'mythical', 'primordial' 'feminine' non-linguistic vocal sound is not something completely different from, but rather related to language. There is sound in linguistic utterances. 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.

Chapter VI deals with male and female pre-recorded voices that do not conform to the stereotypes found in opera and film. The stereotypes are used as a frame of reference to articulate the special position of these voices. Whereas usually the loss and disempowerment that is unbearable for the normal male subject, is projected onto a 'crying' female persona, in these pre-recorded electro-vocal compositions, per contra, the male voices show melancholia in text and tone. The composition with female pre-

recorded voice, *as it grew dark*, also problematizes the usual projection of disempowerment on female personae, because in the liner notes the composer presents the distorted voice as a distortion of (over-)hearing (of the listener), instead of disempowered vocalising (of the vocal persona). However, the composition offers some resistance to this authorial suggestion, inasmuch the temporal order of the voice fragments is unrealistic for a listener overhearing a conversation, as is the absence of one of the voices of the 'overheard' dialogue (Mr Rochester's voice). This unrealistic aural situation refers either to the musical-technical agency of the composer ('the composer's voice') or to a listener, in a state of half-consciousness, uncertain about the reality of his/her perception. Thus, the acousmatic medium (sound without image) encourages the listener to reflect on her/his position. For both composer and listener, audio equipment is an extension of the self that confuses the boundaries between human and machine and subject and object. The listener's uncertainty about the source and quality of the sounds might even blur the boundaries between subject and object, confuse identification and disturb the usual habits of projection and introjection. Moreover, while the position of the composer has become even stronger in acousmatic music, this secure position might diminish a defensive projection of existential loss onto the female voice.

The many triangular structures found in *as it grew dark* dismantle the illusion of directness and immediacy often ascribed to the voice in Western culture. Recording of voices, and composition with pre-recorded voices, shows that vocality may be considered as *écriture* in the Derridean sense. And as textual writing implies 'the death of the author', as announced by Roland Barthes, vocal writing implies 'the death of the vocalist': the recordings will disseminate into the world, and become re-framed, re-interpreted and re-configured by others. I argue in Chapter VII that this 'death' is a risk the vocalist (like the author and the composer) has to take for having a valuable cultural role. The vocalist could eventually be considered as an author of vocality, or even acknowledged as a composer-vocalist, thereby transforming the gender pattern of male author-composer and female performer-vocalist. However, this is not an automatic and predetermined result of technological changes. Different compositions show different relations of composing and vocalising. Moreover, in my analysis of three 'plunderphonic' compositions, I find significant differences in the manner in which the 'stolen' vocal recordings are treated, be it as passive material, as specific vocality, or as vocal persona.

As was elaborated in Chapter I and Chapter VII, I do not consider the author/composer as the ultimate source of meaning or as the master of the composition. I either bracket the author, or consider the author as an analytical category, referring to traces of the author in or around the compositions, or as a construction by a listener ('the composer's voice'). However, as is often the case with such an approach, whether from a feminist angle or not, this results in discussions of compositions predominantly by male authors, while the bracketing of the author may lead to a concealment of this gender inequality. To compensate for this, the last chapter is devoted to a theoretical issue concerning female composers: *écriture féminine musicale*. The focus here is theoretical, exploring the possibilities and limitations of an *écriture féminine musicale* in electroacoustic music. It starts with the question: How to search for women's music while taking into account the de-centralization of the author? I do find it important to consider *écriture féminine musicale* in relation to authorship: it does make a difference whether a vocalist is credited as an author, or not. Traditionally, composing, improvising, and technology are male-gendered domains, while singing and performing specific solo instruments are gendered as feminine. Women composer-performers disrupt this stereotypical dichotomy.

The search for common characteristics in women's music and the desire to find feminine or feminist features is an interpretative gesture. I start off by developing my account of electroacoustic *écriture féminine musicale* in a dialogue with feminist–musicological theories and musical works. Then, I confront several theoretical accounts on feminine musical style with some electro-vocal compositions by female composers. In contradiction to the notion of *écriture féminine musicale* as being mainly non-verbal and pre-linguistic, I have found that text and technology are important elements in the work of many female composer-performers. Finally, I come to the conclusion that these works are not stereotypically feminine and do not show a specific feminine style, but instead combine and exceed gendered practices. The female vocalist-composers combine feminine cultural practices of singing and performance with the masculine cultural domains of avant-garde, authorship, composing, language/text/stories and technology with explicit references to feminine and feminist issues. Moreover, the traditional notion of authorship may collapse through women's preference for interdisciplinary work and collaboration. Women in

the electroacoustic music field do not only combine different musical roles, with different gender connotations, but also frequently cross established categories of media, disciplines and genres. As such, their *écriture féminine musicale* exceeds binary logic and disrupts patriarchal order, as indeed *écriture féminine* claims to do. However, such work creates new spaces for women's practices in the symbolic order and unsettles traditional gendered dichotomies, not by merely disrupting but by effectively *changing* the symbolic order.

Gender issues and women's music can be related to many issues beyond gender, such as the relation composer-performer-listener and the documentation of interdisciplinary electroacoustic music. Cultural analysis is another example of a gendered practice 'beyond gender'. It transgresses the (gendered) dualism of subject and object by dialogical analysis. With this research, I hope to have shown the viability of such an approach for electroacoustic music. On the one hand, this research is an exploration of gender issues in electroacoustic music, in its discourse and listening experience. I hope this will not only stimulate more reflection on the gendered practices of electroacoustic music, but also offer inspiration for further research. There are many gender issues that I didn't address; an important one is a further exploration of the role of masculinity. Nevertheless, I hope to have introduced some issues that go beyond gender and to have contributed to a change in the discourse and reflection on voice and electroacoustic music.

Electroacoustic music is – as it were – a 'laboratory', not only for music technology but also for musical concepts and practices. How innovative is this avant-garde genre with regard to gender issues and the voice? In Chapter I, I ask: What does electroacoustic music's breach of musical conventions reveal about musical gender norms and values? Electroacoustic music is considered innovative, experimental or avant-garde: but does its technological and musical innovations bring about changes in gendered conventions as well? The answer is: 'yes and no'.

Electro-acoustic music turns out to be amazingly conservative, given the ceaseless occurrence of electroacoustic concert compositions for the clichéd combination of high, non-verbal singing soprano and electronics mastered by a male composer, and the near absence of concert compositions for professional male singer and electronics, as I show in Chapter II – but as I have equally noted through many years of concert attendances. 'Old norms and values, it seems, die hard', is the

conclusion of Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld in their study of breaches in the reception of new technology in music (Pinch & Bijsterveld 2003: 559).

> One aspect [...] that deserves attention is the presence of stability in the midst of change. Indeed, it would appear that elements of musical culture are remarkably persistent. Part of the explanation for this may lie in the musical institutions that dominate Western societies – schools, conservatories, concert halls, critics, and so on – and reproduce these values. [...] values central to musical culture have helped inform the production, acceptance, and transformation of new technologies. (Pinch & Bijsterveld 2003: 558)

It may even be the case that innovative technologies require the continuation of conservative musical practices to become accepted.

Yet, there are also many instances in which the use of electronics entails, to a large or lesser extent, breaches of gendered conventions, as I have demonstrated throughout the preceding pages. It does not seem mere coincidence that the gender stereotypes are encountered more often in the rather traditional concert stage settings, while the gender breaches occur when the technology has influenced ontological and institutional musical changes. For example, since the very onset tape music has a problematic relation with the traditional concert setting, it changes the roles of composer and performer and has a profound effect on musical presence and ontology; it is no mere chance then that the use of pre-recorded voice sounds in 'tape' music is somewhat less stereotypical with regard to gender. A further extending example is the blurring of the musical and gendered roles of composer and vocalist, with the help of sound technology, in the work of composer-vocalists (as prevalent sub-category of composer-performers).

With regard to musical *and* gender conventions, electroacoustic music has two faces: conservative and innovative. Electroacoustic music is on the one hand embedded in the traditional worlds of music academies, conservatoires, professional musicians, concert halls and other classical music institutions, infrastructure and funding; on the other hand, it is embedded in technological innovation (which is socially often quite a gender-conservative masculine environment), the world of new media (socially more innovative), and the Do It Yourself mentality that goes with the spread of cheaper and better technology; and then there are influences from (experimental and avant-garde) pop music, performance art and media art. Consequently, the breaches of gender conventions do not so much come with the introduction of new technology per se, but rather with social changes related to the

interaction with other disciplines that may go with the use of new (or older) sound technology.

My quest for gender *in* electroacoustic music, through the archway of the voice, turned through the music outwards to the traces of relations of production, to musical-cultural conventions and institutions, and to interdisciplinary influences. While my objective initially was to connect these external musical aspects to the music 'itself', eventually the boundaries of what music 'itself' is, became porous. The focus on gender issues has helped to find openings and connections, but opened up issues beyond gender as well: in and out of music, in and out of gender.

The voice, mediated by or embedded in electronic sound technology, brings such tensions to the fore. The voice is linked with the body, with nature, with sexual difference, with the unconscious, with one's earliest social interactions and sense of self, with language, with music, with presence, with (pre-historical) signification and representation,[1] with imitation and mimesis, with skill.... The recording, amplification, manipulation, analysis and (re-)synthesis of voice by electronic sound technology, may help to overcome habits of conceiving the voice as pure, natural or transcendental presence. The voice itself may be considered a technology (indeed, by way of phonetic science, much electronic sound technology is influenced by or modelled on vocal 'technology'[2]). Because the voice is associated with essentialist notions, by bringing out the artificiality of the voice, essentialist habits may be unsettled. Electronic sound technology may multiply the ambiguity of the voice[3] and offer openings for bending or breaching the gender grid as well as musical conventions.

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[1] See Tolbert (2002).

[2] Such as the source – filter/resonance model and the use of formants (characteristic peaks in the frequency spectrum).

[3] On the paradoxical ambiguity of voice, see Dolar (2006).