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### The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music

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**Publication date**  
2013

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Bosma, H. M. (2013). *The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music*.

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## SUMMARY

Electroacoustic music is – as it were – a ‘laboratory’, not only for music technology, but also for musical characteristics, practices and concepts. How innovative is this avant-garde genre with regard to gender issues and the voice? Studies on gender issues in electroacoustic music are sparse. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, I have looked at neighbouring schools of thought such as feminist musicology, gender and technology studies, women’s studies, cultural analysis and film studies for inspiration and background. The combination of voice and electronics provides an entrance to gender issues: 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; and the voice can be a link to gender issues in opera, film, literature and psychoanalysis, as elaborated by Joke Dame and Kaja Silverman, i.a.

My main focus is on the music itself and on the references in the music (e.g. text), and surrounding the music (e.g. programme notes). The main sources are CD recordings, live performances, scores and pre-recorded ‘tape’ parts, as well as texts about the compositions.

The de-centralization of authorship is a major aspect of my approach. This is a thread running through the whole dissertation and elaborated on in Chapter VII. Starting point is the idea of “the death of the author” as proposed by Roland Barthes and refined afterwards in literary studies and feminist musicology, i.a. However, I am critical of merely ignoring the composer, particularly as concerns feminist musicology and contemporary music. I both bracket and analyse the position of the author, and shift the attention towards other subject positions such as the female vocalist and the listener.

Chapter I provides a theoretical background. In each of the subsequent chapters a theme or concept is elaborated upon: in Chapter II, gender patterns; in Chapter III, embodiment; in Chapter IV, the vocal persona; in Chapter V, the manipulated recorded female voice in Berio’s *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*; in Chapter VI, more manipulated recorded voices and the listener’s position; in Chapter VII, the author and the vocalist-

as-author; in Chapter VIII, *écriture féminine musicale*. Finally, the strings are attached in the Conclusion.

Chapter I discusses the definition and discourse of electroacoustic music, the various approaches of feminist musicology, and the methodology of ‘dialogical’ cultural-musical analysis. I elaborate on the masculinity of the prevalent discourse on/of electroacoustic music and argue that an overemphasis on formalism, objectivism and technology could function as a fetish.

In Chapter II, a large body of electroacoustic compositions are compared in an attempt to discern patterns with regard to the gender of the composer, the gender of the vocalist and the (non-)linguistic character of the gendered vocal sounds. Indeed, I have discovered some strong gender patterns. Thus, composers are far more often male than female, while women are prominently involved in the production as a vocalist, be it performing on a concert stage or in a studio during the production process. Whereas there are many compositions for female vocalist and tape/electronics, to be performed live in a Western extended classical vocal style, there are next to none for male singer and tape/electronics. (These findings are further discussed and differentiated particularly regarding pre-recorded voices.) This gender pattern matches a stereotypical gender pattern that pervades the general culture and which typically associates woman with body, performance, tradition, non-verbal sound and singing, and man with technology, innovation, language and authority, i.e. relating masculinity to mind and femininity to body.

Once these patterns have been determined in Chapter II, this shall provide a reference for further close analysis of individual pieces in the subsequent chapters. The archetypical duo male composer – female vocalist, found in Chapter II to be prevalent in electro-vocal music, is discussed from different perspectives in the following chapters. Gender stereotypes but also gender transgressions are found in electro-vocal music. A preview of these issues is presented in Chapter III, with a focus on embodiment and power in relation to the live singing vocalist. Inspired by Judith Butler’s account of power, I argue that female vocalists have power because of their subordination to social-musical conventions. However, musical performance and practice also provide possibilities for change. Using electronic music technology, some vocalists change musical-vocal practices and conventions and dissolve or combine the roles of vocalist and composer.

In Chapter IV, my focus is on the female vocal persona rather than on the female vocalist. I apply and react to the ideas of Edward Cone, who brackets the real composer (author), but nonetheless 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 with analyses of Milton Babbitt – *Philomel*, Lars-Gunnar Bodin – *Anima* and Alejandro Viñao – *Hildegard’s Dream*. I question Cone’s statement that electronic tape music is unitary and that it directly represents the ‘composer’s voice’. I find heterogeneity in the tape parts; sometimes a fusion of vocal part and tape part; sometimes an annexation of the tape part by the vocal part, or vice versa. Identity and transformation feature in these compositions.

In Chapter V, I discuss how the pre-recorded voice and the influence of Cathy Berberian is – as it were – written out of the composition *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* by an essay of composer Luciano Berio and by accounts of others often based on the composer’s theoretical framing. I, on the other hand, take in my analysis of *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* Berberian’s vocalicity as point of departure (elaborating on Adriana Cavarero’s account of the voice, i.a.).

Chapter VI deals with male and female pre-recorded voices that do not conform to the stereotypes. Whereas typically the loss and disempowerment that is unbearable for the normal male subject is projected onto a ‘crying’ female persona, divergently, in these electro-vocal tape compositions the male voices are allowed to show melancholia in text and tone. Paul Lansky’s *as it grew dark*, a tape composition with female pre-recorded voice, also problematizes the usual projection of disempowerment on female personae. Thus, the acousmatic medium encourages the listener to reflect on her/his position.

In Chapter VII, I start with theoretically exploring the issue of authorship in relation to singing voices. I relate this to discussions on authorship in (feminist) musicology, literary theory, film studies, gender and technology studies, and law. Why is only the composer, and not the vocalist, considered to be an author? With the advent of audio and visual recording technology, performance can become a permanent, authoritative text. I argue that, by recording, vocalicity may be considered as *écriture* in a Derridean sense. As textual ‘writing’ implies ‘the death of the author’, as announced by Roland Barthes, such vocal ‘writing’ implies ‘the death of the vocalist’: the recorded voice will disseminate into the world, and become re-framed,

re-interpreted and re-configured by others. I argue that this ‘death’ is an inherent risk the vocalist (like the author/composer) must take for assuming a valuable cultural role; and that this may, potentially, transform the gender pattern of male author–composer and female performer–vocalist. However, I am not arguing for technological determinism. I discuss several compositions with pre-recorded female voices that show each different relations of composing and vocalizing. For example, the pre-recorded female voice is assigned such diverse roles as musical material, object, creative partner or author in the tape compositions of Luciano Berio/Cathy Berberian, Larry Austin’s *La Barbara: The Name, The Sounds, The Music*, and Joan La Barbara’s own compositions as a composer–performer. Moreover, in my analysis of three ‘plunderphonic’ compositions, Christian Marclay – *Maria Callas*, Gilius van Bergeijk – *Een Lied van Schijn en Weezen* and Charles Dodge – *Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental*, I find significant differences in the manner in which the ‘stolen’ voices are treated, be it as passive material, as specific vocality, or as vocal persona.

Chapter VIII focuses on a theoretical issue concerning female composers: *écriture féminine musicale*. It starts with the question: How to search for women’s music while taking into account the de-centralization of the author? 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 mainly non-verbal and pre-linguistic, I find that text and technology are important elements in the work of many female composer-performers. I come to the conclusion that these works are not stereotypically feminine and do not show a specific feminine style, but rather 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, and make 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 they also often cross established categories of media, disciplines and genres.

Electroacoustic music is considered innovative, experimental or avant-garde: but do its technological and musical innovations bring with it changes in gendered

conventions as well? The answer is: ‘yes and no’. No, in some respects electroacoustic 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. Yet, yes, there are also many instances in which the use of electronics entails, to a large or lesser extent, breaches of gendered conventions. The gender stereotypes are encountered more often in rather traditional concert stage settings; while the gender breaches occur when the technology has influenced ontological and institutional musical changes such as the changing roles of the creators, the departure of the concert stage, of the musical score and of the concept of the musical work, and interdisciplinarity.

The following academic articles are part of this doctoral dissertation, in a revised and/or extended form:

- 2003 'Bodies of Evidence, Singing Cyborgs, and Other Gender Issues in Electrovoical Music', *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music and Technology* 8/1: 5–17. (Chapter II and III)
- 2006 'Musical Washing Machines, Composer-Performers, and Other Blurring Boundaries: How Women Make a Difference in Electroacoustic Music', *Intersections: Canadian Journal of Music* 26/2: 97–117. (Chapter VIII)
- 2008 'Voice or Ear? The Female Voice and the Listener's Position in Paul Lansky's *as it grew dark*' in Carolyn Birdsall and Anthony Enns (eds.). *Sonic Mediations: Body, Sound, Technology*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 109–125. (Chapter VI)
- Forthcoming '*Thema (Omaggio a Joyce): a listening experience as homage to Cathy Berberian*' in Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anne Sivuoja and Pieter Verstraete (eds.), *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate. (Chapter V)

Various conference papers and other publications were produced in an earlier stage, especially concerning chapters II, III, V, VII, and VIII, such as at the International Computer Music Conference 1995 (Banff, CA); and International Computer Music Conference 1996 (Hong Kong); Feminist Theory and Music 4 conference (1997, University of Virginia); keynote address at the conference In and Out of the Sound Studio (Concordia University, Montreal, 2005); Close Encounters, the 4th European Biannual Conference of the Society for Science, Literature, and the Arts (2006, UvA); conference Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality and Performance (2006, UvA); Electroacoustic Music Studies network conference 07 (De Montfort University, Leicester UK, 2007); and in *ASCA Brief* (1996); *eContact!* (1998); *Switch* (1998); *ctrl+shift art - ctrl+shift gender: Convergences of Gender, New Media and Art* (2000).