REVIEW *|* Singing the Body Electric: The Human Voice and Sound Technology

*Miriama Young*

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Miriama Young’s monograph on human voice and sound technology manages successfully to introduce and guide the reader/listener through the vast material on the topic which includes music, aesthetics, philosophy, history, musical practice and techniques, literature, sound, film, theatre, etc. by writers such as Jean Paul Sartre (1938), Sammuel Becket (1973), Theodor Adorno (1990), Pierre Schaeffer (1966), Simon Frith (1990), Marshall McLuhan (1964), Carolyn Abbate (1991), Rene Girard (1965), Michel Chion (1999), Mladen Dolar (2006), Jean Baudrillard (1994), Jonathan Sterne (2003), Trevor Wishart (1996), and more. The author examines the transformations of the voice through sound technology devices and their subsequent implications in music and sound art, in perception and everyday life from a historical and analytical perspective.

It is not just the information and the music examples discussed, the literature cited, or the links made with philosophy, history and other domains, that validate Young's attempt to talk about and ‘around’ the voice, its transformations and extensions through sound technologies, as well as its displacement, embodiment, dis- /re- embodiment. It is mostly the discussion on them throughout the whole text that enables the reader to further his/her understanding and become also aware of the connections with the ‘other than music’ fields of human wandering, contemplation, and art practices.

While it seems that it is almost impossible to define “what *is* the voice” as Mladen Dolar (2006), Michel Chion (1999) and Miriama Young (2015) support, ‘paradoxically’ the sound of the human voice is inseparable from the person which ‘owns’ it, being like an identity stamp - regardless of the medium through which it is heard. Speech, song, inner voice, language or paralanguage, expression of feelings and meanings, all aspects of human civilization are inherently bond up with the voice. It is thus not surprising that the focus of our attention to all vocal sounds is almost involuntary. In this technological era starting from the last century, the means and mediums through which the voice has been extended, multiplied, and ‘evolved’, result to various new cases of application in the arts.

The book contains five chapters, each of which examines different facets of the theme, five interviews (‘voices I-V’) with pioneer electroacoustic music composers, and finally a sixth voice – her voice – which is expressed as ‘interludes’. Through this sixth voice she (partly) documents her compositions which are included in the album *Speak Volumes,* a workconnected with the theme of the monograph. The structure of the book is intriguing as it ‘embodies’ - interleaved with the main narrative - interviews, etymological references, and interludes, while most of the titles (chapters and sub-chapters) use a highly poetic language. The sequential combination of the academic with the more intimate or personal language (interviews, interludes) is striking, even remarkable, as the thread of thought is kept intact until the end of the text.

Young is starting from the condition that the voice could be interpreted as a piece of highly sophisticated technology and intellectually dissolves the separation of human and machine, considering the ‘mediated voice’ as technology and all subsequent transformations as extensions of the voice in a “continuum in which the ‘voice’ is *always* technology” (Young, M. 2015:6). In line with Descartes (1991:99) statement about the human body as a machine, she examines how the connection between voice, body, and technology has been applied in the music of the western culture of the last 150 years. Although this approach is consistent and validated in academic terms, one cannot put aside the idea that the voice not only indicates the human body operations for the production of sound, but also becomes a mirror of the state of this particular human being, of his/her feelings, culture, community, soul, and mind. The voice operates at the same time as a ‘mirror’ of the being and as the medium through which the words, the cry, the laugh, the pain, the song, and much more are transmitted.

We could speculate that the voice is the very first and ultimate musical instrument, thus the ‘extended voice through technological means’ either as ‘technology’ or not is at the very core of the human personal and cultural creative practices. So it is not surprising that Young includes in the discussion all these different facets of western culture.

Her research on the topic results in a carefully combined reading of the signs-sounds-words of our times ranging from popular to avant-garde and academic approaches to musical composition and practice. She not only analyses the vocal element in its relation to the body and the technology as applied in the music of Damon Albarn, Dager Mouse, Matmos, Alvin Lucier, Bjork, Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Yiannis Kyriakides, Radiohead, John Chowning, Paul Lansky, Imogen Heap, Pamela Z, Kraftwerk, Ser, Ernst Tosch, Paul Hindemith, Janet Jackson, Q-Tip, Luciano Berio, Christian Marclay, Moby, Gerstman, Kelly and Mathews, and the voice of HAL-9000, but she also offers to the reader-listener a list of 525 more works to further his/her own study of the theme. Moreover, the decision to interview and include in this book the experiences and different ‘voices’ of Trevor Wishart, Katharine Norman, Paul Lansky, Eduardo Reck Miranda and Bora Yoon, gives the reader access to valuable historical source material, while adding more voices to this analogue ‘of thoughts- chorus- effect’ of the book.

How to read and listen the *Singing the Body Electric* is a matter that inevitably could include many different approaches and types of listening, but it is definitely a monograph that invites the reader to come back again and again, to discover and re-discover more voices, ideas, narratives, discussions, music, sounds, and valuable source materials. It is an amazing work in which you do not have to agree with all the different ‘voices’ in order to participate.

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