

The Imagined Voice: How Singing and Vocal Music Affect Me and My Work

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When my father died, my mother asked me to sit next to her at the memorial service (rather than one of my two sisters), because “I can count on you to keep your cool.” I did that, until we were asked to sing “Morning Has Broken.” Somehow, after the first verse of that hymn, I not only broke down—I cried long and hard for the first time since my dad’s passing.

I’ve given quite a bit of thought to this. Why should singing with other people push my emotions forward, when nothing else (written speeches, my own family’s grief, the tears of others) could do that? Where does this release come from? I think it’s this: singing, especially singing with other people, touches parts of us that otherwise don’t get touched. It’s pre-verbal, even, and not even frontal lobe stuff. The function of music (and especially singing) lives somewhere in our brain stems, left over from when our ancestors squatted on cave floors and chanted together.

As a composer and a conductor, I’ve learned about singing through the back door. I never took a voice lesson (although many times, while I was conducting opera, various singers suggested that I do just that). I have sung in choirs, even as recently as three years ago when a former student asked me to sing the Brahms *Requiem* on short notice (he needed basses who weren’t afraid of German). I grew up, as do most American instrumentalists, with a pronounced aversion to operatic vocal production—I had never been to a live opera performance, but I thought I knew what I didn’t like. And that sound—the loud, highly resonant and vibrato-laden voice that Pavarotti once called “controlled yelling” on the TODAY show—really put me off. But halfway through my freshman year, one of my friends turned me on to Puccini, and later to Wagner and Strauss. *Turandot* was the first opera I heard all the way through, and something in the power and the pathos (Liù’s death scene still completely undoes me) got through to me. When I actually began going to hear opera live, I was bitten hard. My first “can’t imagine life without it” operas were *Salome*, *Die Walküre*, and *Der Freischütz*. So much drama, so much ground (and time) for music to fill and to carry. As for the sound of the operatic voice, I realized that the function of training singers that way was to fill an auditorium with vocal sound: one singer could actually reclaim the stage from an entire orchestra. The *Liebestod*, Wotan’s Farewell, “Che gelida manina”... So THAT’s why they sing that way. The operatic voice was never intended to be heard close-up, any more than a trumpet is. Suddenly all the things that used to bother me about operatic singing were attractive to me, and I couldn’t get enough of opera. Or of singers themselves: they

seemed to be the most in-touch-with-their-feelings musicians I knew, and it seemed as though they had a lot to teach the rest of us about emotional communication in music.

I still feel that way, and were I to have my way, I'd write nothing but opera, choral music, songs, and musical theatre. These are the genres where music functions best, carrying (and directing) the emotional inner life of those of us who give it a chance. Needless to say, I haven't had the luxury of writing only vocal music, and to be truthful, my vocal writing would become gray if that's all I wrote. Fortunately, I've been commissioned to write, among other things, a full-length oratorio, several works of choral music, several works of mixed vocal/instrumental chamber music, more than two dozen songs, and three operas. I'd like to think that the twenty-five years I spent as a professional orchestral musician have truly informed my writing in all of these genres as well. But with my training as an instrumentalist, perhaps I have a different view of what the voice does (or should do) than those who are basically vocal composers.

What are the facets of my music that matter the most when I'm dealing with singers? To me, rhythmic and pitch accuracy are paramount. Because my music is basically tonal and not experimental, and since it doesn't rely on special effects or "color" as a cover for structure and design, I care very much how singers perform it. Diction is important to me as well. I would like to think that all composers feel this way about diction in vocal performance, but I've conducted quite a few works in which the composer clearly did not care if the words were audible or not. I once conducted an avant-garde work at the Aspen Music Festival by a well-known experimental composer that was a re-telling of a Greek myth for baritone soloist, set with two chamber groups tuned a quarter-tone apart. The soloist, a doctoral student from Juilliard, worked on this piece for weeks trying to learn every pitch and every rhythm, but once we put the entire piece together he was flailing. "How can I learn these notes, when everything around me is so abstract and so seemingly non-tonal," he asked me, and added that he was tempted to refuse to sing the piece. I told him to forget about the pitches, in that case, and "go for the drama." The resulting performance (in front of the composer, who had arrived by then) was moderately successful from my point of view—the singer was able to "sell" the drama of the work, even though he was off by thirds and fourths on some of the pitches. How did the famous composer feel about it? "I loved it," he said. "I've never heard a better performance of my music." I learned from that experience that some composers, frequently the ones who write the most dense, hard-to-get-to music, are really more interested in emotional content than their music might suggest.

Part of my attraction to vocal music, and to writing for the voice, is this: I'm also a poet. I started my professional life as a budding journalist, and then a novelist, before turning my attentions completely to music. Now, I have come to view poetry as my final point of entry into the writing of words. My approach to poetry is much like my approach to music: I favor structured verse over free-form verse, just as I favor music that has a distinguishable form over music that meanders or feels its way.

I write sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, limericks—poems whose journeys of meaning and feeling are mapped by a preexisting structure. When I choose to set a poem (and I never set my own poems), I look for certain qualities that I will be able to embed in my music. Those qualities include symmetry, assonance, shortness of lines (for breathing), and compactness of thought. When I set a poem, I look for a sense of repetition or similarity that can translate into musical phrases that do the same thing. I map the emotional curve of the poem, often by writing in the margins of the poem, to help me plot a musical structure that will support it.

What does this mean to singers? Mostly, it means that nothing is abstract in my music; every note, every phrase marking or dynamic, every articulation is there for a good reason. My favorite "interpreters" of my vocal music are those who bother to learn my notes, my rhythms, and my ensemble sense (with other instruments or other singers) before they attempt to perform a piece. Jan DeGaetani, the late great mezzo-soprano, was a close personal friend at an early point of my life as a composer. Jan, if her name is unfamiliar to you, was the singer who made George Crumb famous (mostly for her recording of *Ancient Voices of Children*) and Jacob Druckman as well (for her recordings and performances of several of his works, including *Lamia*, which was dedicated to her). She made about a dozen recordings for Nonesuch Records in the 1970s and 80s, at a time when contemporary music was dealing with ultra-complexity as well as neo-Romanticism. She worked mainly with the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble in New York, which was conducted by Arthur Weisberg, who, not coincidentally, was both my bassoon teacher and my conducting mentor when I was a graduate student in New York. I often watched her master classes at Aspen, and again at the Eastman School of Music when I was a visiting professor there in 1985-86.

Jan, who was so famous as a contemporary music singer (to the point of having her face in *Time* magazine with the legend "Queen of New Music" in the early 80s), had actually made her name as a singer of very early music, singing works like *The Play of Daniel* and other medieval pieces in New York. She maintained that singing was singing—there is no "special way" to approach the singing of new music, or of early music. She always bristled when people said "oh, but it's easy for you to sing these difficult pieces, because you have perfect pitch." "I do NOT have perfect pitch," she would counter, "I have decent relative pitch—and I work damned hard to learn these pieces!" She taught her students (including Renée Fleming and Dawn Upshaw) to always count, and to emulate the articulation and other technique of the instrumentalists they were performing with. I once conducted a rehearsal of Lukas Foss' *Time Cycle* with one of Jan's students, and she was coaching the entire time. "Hear how that vibraphone note slowly decays? Do that, and do it with the word "clocks"—how can you create the illusion on a word like "clocks" that your voice is still sounding after the final consonant?" She would ask her students to imitate the clarinet (no vibrato) if the musical lines converged, or to begin a note with a white tone and then allow it to bloom, matching the violin.

In 1978, Jan commissioned me to write a major work for mezzo-soprano, English horn (her husband, Philip West, played that instrument), and piano. "We don't have money to spend on this," she cautioned, "but I can promise you at least a dozen performances in the first year, and that the world premiere will take place in a major venue overseas." What more incentive could a thirty-year-old composer want? The only problem I could see was justifying the presence of the English horn: I needed a poem that would call for the presence of a sound like that. After reading hundreds of possible poems, I settled on a Pablo Neruda poem called *Abeja Blanca* (White Bee), which I made into a fourteen-minute scena. This very erotic, very sensual dream-poem fit my needs perfectly, because of the constant reference to the distant love-object as a "white bee, buzzing in my soul." It seemed to me that I could make the English horn personify the bee, and to have its musical lines echo those of the singer. Jan was true to her promise: she premiered the work (with Philip West and pianist Gilbert Kalish) at the Aldeburgh Festival in June of 1979. Benjamin Britten (probably my strongest musical hero) had already passed away, but Peter Pears was very much alive at the time. I was able to meet him and members of Britten's family during the week I stayed on the Suffolk Coast. One member of the audience at that first performance was a man who had been a personal friend of Pablo Neruda, who (along with being very complimentary about the piece) gave Jan some advice about the pronunciation of certain Spanish words in the dialect favored by Neruda. This, to me, was as close to heaven as a composer could ever get.

In my own music, I like singers to find the same kinds of interconnections with instrumentalists that Jan did, although there aren't very many who can approach her level of finesse. I'm careful to set words in ranges and tessituras that fit them (and fit the voice-type for which I'm writing), and I honestly recoil at the current trend of "extremes" of range. Why force a coloratura to stay above the staff for minutes on end, or a basso profundo to stay below it, when that merely hides the words being sung? (My instrumental writing is approached the same way: I want an oboe to sound like an oboe, most of the time.) If I were forced to choose a vocal type that I'm attracted to, it would be to someone with a lot of flexibility. Dawn Upshaw is probably the soprano who comes closest to that; her recording of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is the only one I've heard in which a naive sentiment is expressed properly—the opening phrases, descriptive in Agee's wonderful poem without even being complete sentences, are sung almost casually, like stream-of-consciousness speech. Upshaw's technique, learned in large part during her studies with Jan, allowed her to explore all kinds of vocal color: she can sound like a ten-year-old boy when she needs to (and "Knoxville" does call for that at times), but can also allow her voice to invoke the cosmos. My own work *Remembrance in Black and White*, similarly, requires the singer to spin out lists of similes: "corn, peas, apricots split open in the sun" without operatic indulgence, so that the bucolic scene can be rendered naturalistically.

Perhaps that's why, in recent years, I've become more attracted to musical theatre than to contemporary opera, and in my own song-writing to approach the idea of cabaret. If, as Jan DeGaetani said, "singing is singing," then good singing should also apply to musical theatre, and these days, I think it does. Broadway singers are much better now than they used to be, when a real voice like Ezio Pinza's would stick out on the stage. These singers, and a few non-Broadway singers of light rock and country music as well, seem to be better suited to conveying meaning as well as good vocal technique. I'm speaking of singers like Laura Benanti, Boyd Gaines, Diane Frantantoni, and a host of other recent stage stars. I'm speaking of Mary Chapin Carpenter, James Taylor, Allison Kraus, and other recording artists who use their voices well. The first time I heard Allison Kraus sing, I was reduced to tears—it was the purest voice I'd ever heard in my life, but I know she's conservatory-trained. Frank Sinatra attributed his success as a singer to his classical training, and a careful listen to any of his recordings from the late 40s and early 50s reveals a sense of breath control that's rare in a pop singer. I'm speaking of vocal groups like Chanticleer and the King's Singers, but also of more popular or fringe groups: The Bobs, one of my favorite vocal ensembles, consisted of five commercially trained singers who created and performed original songs *a cappella* in freakishly successful ways. (I've used The Bobs in teaching composition lessons, for everything from vocal arranging to ways of using syllables from the text as back-up sounds underneath the principal voice.) One of my favorite students at UT, a composition major named Greg Bolin, is now the Musical Director at Texas State University, one of the leading colleges in the US for music theatre. While his degrees say he is a composer, he was also trained as an undergraduate to sing and act in musical theatre—and now, he teaches singing to Broadway wannabes at Texas State, using a method called One Voice. The idea behind this is that there shouldn't be a difference between operatic vocal projection and music theatre singing. I don't know enough about it to have an opinion, but it seems to me that this is the way of the future. More and more, Broadway singers sound like really good opera singers, and really good opera singers can sing Broadway tunes without sounding like they're slumming.

How do I explain what the presence of a singer in music means to me? I can demonstrate what happens, but I can't actually explain it. I was rehearsing a new work a week ago by a young American composer named Mark Kilstofte called *The White Album*. The four-song cycle, for female voice and an instrumental group of five players, is made from four different poems that all share the common word *white* in their subject matter. The instrumentalists and I rehearsed the piece twice without the soloist, to iron out their difficulties before the singer joined the mix. All went well, up to and including the first rehearsal with the soloist—a rich-voiced mezzo with whom I've worked before. She had done her preparation well: notes, rhythms, ensemble awareness were all there, and that first rehearsal made me think that our work was nearly finished. But the second rehearsal, during which I dared to ask her to try a few different vocal colors, suggested a different way of interpreting one of the poems, and then

asking her to read two of the poems to the players before we played through them, was a different matter. Suddenly all this emotion began rising within me, and (I suspect) within the players as well. At the end of the final song, I realized that I was in tears. Thirty years ago, I'd have hidden this from the singer (and from the players) but at my age (I'm now 69 as I write this) I've decided to let things like this show. What is music for, if not to move people? And if it can't move the people who are performing it, what does that say about us?

How does one account for the change between rehearsal number three and rehearsal number four? There's no other way to explain it than this: the singing voice is still the most internal, the most powerful element of music. Once the singer has a grip on what she (or he) can do with the piece, the listeners will feel it as well. There is an undeniable subconscious human interchange, which to me is twice as powerful as that between any instrumental performer (no matter how sublime) and an audience.

Is it because of the words? No. The difference between reading a line of poetry (or of an opera libretto) and singing it is an apples-and-oranges comparison. I wrote an hour-long oratorio in the late 90s about John F. Kennedy for The Handel and Haydn Society of Boston. The terms of the commission were dictated to me: narrator, solo cello, double chorus, vocal soloists, and orchestra. When the piece was premiered, the narrator was the famous "Voice of PBS" biographer, David McCullough. He brought the full range of his talent to reading lines of Kennedy speeches, plus a bit of Shakespeare. The piece was quite successful, but when I played a recording of it to the American composer Dominick Argento (one of the finest opera composers the USA has ever produced), he made a comment that I never forgot: "when you add the speaking voice to a work that has singing in it, all the magic disappears." He wasn't disparaging David McCullough; he was making a comment about the difference between singing and speaking. "Speaking," he said, "is theatre. Singing is magic."