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by Ginger Dellenbaugh

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For the Mup

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Author's Note

Between the 15th and 20th of September, 1954, Maria Callas and one of her most influential mentors, the conductor Tullio Serafin, recorded two programs of arias for EMI at a studio in London. These were the first recital discs that Callas would release publicly. The first was a selection of Puccini arias. The second disc of lyric and coloratura arias forms the structure for this book.

Even forty years after her death, Callas still is, in many ways, the prototype for the pop-diva stereotype as we experience it today: genius in the ring with catastrophe. Hers was a life subject to public scrutiny and seemingly doomed to fail, if only as a consequence of fame. As is often the case with compelling public figures, a number of biographies have emerged over the years trying to illuminate the “woman behind the voice,” searching for a more revealing side of Callas than the one she exhibited in public. Callas was a private person, leaving few letters or other documents behind. This has not hindered biographers, however, from raking all aspects of her private life over the coals; some of them devote an almost prurient amount of space to Callas's sex life and public outbursts. Sensational nicknames writhe across tawdry biography

AUTHOR'S NOTE

covers: La Divina Assoluta, Lamb, Tigress, Sacred Monster, Greek Fire. Seen through a contemporary lens, the public's investment in the rise and fall of Amy Winehouse seems like an update of the obsession with Callas's life and career.

This is, however, not a book about Maria Callas's life, nor is it a book specifically about opera. For the former, there are many excellent biographies which have informed this volume—they are listed in the bibliography. For the latter, I am indebted to the opera historians that I have referenced to write this text and am grateful for their work in addressing the complexities of this multifaceted art form.

Instead, this is a reflection on Maria Callas's voice, on reception, description, and cultural context. Opera, as it is discussed here, is both a performance practice with specific technical demands and a cultural concept—a mark of high culture, a cliché, a cinematic tool. My approach to both of these aspects is limited by the type of aria—lyric and coloratura—and their chronology, which spans the nineteenth century. This time frame also reflects, for the most part, a certain method of vocal pedagogy and thinking about the voice that maps onto my own personal experience as a conservatory student and singer. Almost everything I learned as a young singer, from vocal exercises (Nicola Vaccai's 1832 *Metodo Pratico* and Ferdinand Sieber's *Vocalises* from the 1870s and 1880s) to repertoire (German lieder, French mélodie, and lyric and coloratura arias), reflects a singing practice and canon of vocal works that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe.

Listening to Maria Callas has always felt, to me, like a purely visceral experience, similar to watching a drunk

champion at a motor-cross. The potential for brilliance and disaster is palpable, almost magnified. Movement is quick. Her voice slips on some notes and gives too much force to others; in the complete vocal mayhem, there are moments of stillness and clarity that shine like chrome through dust, giving a glimpse of a radiance marked by scratches and cracks. The exceptional and the questionable all contribute to her compelling vocal singularity without detracting from the overwhelming force of the whole.

Most of all, while listening to these tracks I am overwhelmingly aware of Callas's masterful command of vocal technique. Even when it may seem that she is channeling some force beyond her control, Callas is a virtuosic vocal craftsman, a fact too often overlooked in biographies that attribute the uncanny power of her performances to emotional and biographical extremes. My focus on vocal technique in this book is in an attempt, in some small way, to return some agency to Maria Callas, and thus other female vocalists, as artistic laborers and technical masters of their own voices.

This is a book about listening—not just to be moved but to trace the sonic contours created by a woman practicing her craft at the highest levels. The cacophony caused by second-hand reports, gossip, and contemporary critique is exciting, but can be deafening; inasmuch as these elements contribute to the legend, they often obscure the practice of the artist. If we are to find any trace of Maria Callas at all, it is not in how she lived her life, who she loved, or how she died but in the artifacts she left behind. It is in the voice.

1

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act I

Io son l'umile ancella [I am the humble
servant of the creative spirit]

The opening two arias on this album are taken from Francesco Cilea's (1866–1950) most famous opera, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, which premiered in 1902 in Milan. It was the fourth musical setting of the 1849 play by Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé, loosely based on the life of French actress Adrienne Lecouvreur, one of the most renowned actors of the early eighteenth-century stage. During her lifetime, Lecouvreur was both celebrated for her naturalistic, tragic performances, and infamous for her love affairs. When she lay dying at an early age in what some considered suspicious circumstances, Lecouvreur's unwillingness to renounce her profession condemned her to burial in unconsecrated ground. One of her most ardent admirers, Voltaire, immortalized her talent and beauty, and criticized the hypocrisy of the French clergy, in a poem after learning of her death.

Like the biography of so many of the famous singers and actresses who would bring her character to life on stage and screen, including Callas, Sarah Bernard, and Joan

Crawford, the tale of Lecouvreur’s life has been generously edited, if not reinvented, to reinforce Romantic stereotypes of female creativity and sacrifice. In this particular aria, the fictional Lecouvreur is rejecting the praise she receives for her acting, opening with a confession designed to accentuate the fragility of her body, and the strength of the external spirit that moves within it: “You see?” She says, “I am barely breathing.” The actress continues to protest that “I am the humble servant of the creator genius; he offers me speech that I give to others’ hearts.” She emphasizes her unimportance, effacing her body from this divine seance: “I am the accent of the verse, the echo of the human drama, the fragile instrument, lowly handmaiden . . . timid, playful, terrible: my name is fidelity. My voice is just a whisper that, with the new day, will die”

Callas never performed the role on stage, and this is the only recording we have of her singing these particular arias. It is a bold opening choice for her first official concert recording; rather than set the tone for the album with a bombastic operatic showstopper, Callas (and one of her most important artistic influences, conductor Tullio Serafin), instead opted for a slightly ambiguous introduction that is dreamy, even pensive.

The sung portion of the aria begins and ends with breath: the “barely breathing” of the initial protest, and the dying whisper at the conclusion. This feat of breathlessness, when operatic singing demands a steady flow of controlled air pressure, is not only a technical challenge—it also creates an effect that embeds the singer’s voice into the sound-tapestry woven by the orchestra.

The aria begins with undulations of sweetly harmonic strings over a gentle sustained tone. These waves of sound slow down, as if through harmonic inertia, leaving an opening for Callas to utter the delicate “Ecco!” [Listen!]—Lecouvreur’s demand, but also Callas’s own. The voice is introduced to the ear; our listening cleaves to it as the strings ooze back in around the sung melody, lapping at it, washing over it. The vocal line is restrained, as if an afterthought. The characteristic amalgam of muffled tone and almost nasal clarity that distinguishes Callas’s unique vocal timbre is clearly audible. One hears her use of the space between the cheeks and lips and the hard gums behind them in these passages; the softness of the mouth as she articulates the text allows for the plangency of this articulating flesh to color the sound. (Anyone can feel the potential of this part of the face by blowing out through the lips as if to imitate the chuffing sound of a horse.)

Cilea constructs an increasing effacement of his fictional Lecouvreur as the aria progresses. The voice has a brief repartee with a violin as if to articulate the actresses’ status as “mere instrument.” The vocal line becomes more disjunct, unable to match the more conjunct melodies expressed by the orchestra. In the final moments of the aria, as Callas sings the octaves written to express Lecouvreur’s whispering, dying voice, the last note sounds on the verge of instability; the narrowed timbre of the vocal production almost makes the pitch flat, as if Callas is forgetting to sing. She lies back into the lush cushion of the strings that swell from the orchestra, and they absorb her fading last note.

The reciprocity between singer and orchestra is exquisite; the deliberate precariousness of that final note, as it acquiesces

to the orchestral embrace, makes the acute harmony of the strings all the richer and sweeter in its accuracy. The singer, too, remains autonomous of the orchestra's ranks through this gesture. We are reminded, in that brief moment of harmonic instability, of humanity, of vocal technique, and of Callas, who could easily have been subsumed into the Romantic, perhaps even lugubrious, slurry of the orchestration. Instead, we are acutely aware of her presence, even when she is silent.

In 1969, Maria Callas appeared in her only non operatic film role as the titular character in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea*. Pasolini's interpretation of the Greek tragedy is gritty and bleak, verging on barbarous. As Medea, the abandoned sorceress who murders her own sons to exact revenge upon their fickle father, Callas haunts the screen. In close-ups, her face is mask-like, dark eyes enormous, hair wild, rows of chains and charms around a neck that seems too fragile to bear their weight. She barely speaks, and when she does, it's as if into a vacuum. While she pleads, young men in sheepskins grin back at her benignly. Stumbling away from their camp, she paces the cracked, parched landscape; muttering to herself, she wonders why she no longer recognizes the earth and the sky, why they no longer speak to her. Medea is, quite clearly, not of this world, alienated from the environment that surrounds her, unheard and misunderstood.

A year before filming, Maria Callas had been quite publicly abandoned by her lover, shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, for the glamorous presidential widow Jackie Kennedy. Her voice, according to some critics, was in tatters. She had not appeared on the opera stage for a number of years. The face

that fills the screen in Pasolini's film, proud and charismatic, mirrors the face that looks out from numerous record covers, opera posters, and the front pages of lurid tabloids, making the conflation of actress and character not only tantalizing but almost inevitable. As one review of the film concluded, "Callas could play a passionate character who avenged herself with exacting composure, at least in part, because she was one" (Feidelson, 2014).

This nearly silent, resigned Medea forms a poignant coda for the Callas legend, as it was a virtuosic vocal embodiment of Medea that, early on in her career, established her as an opera icon. Until Callas took the title role, Luigi Cherubini's *Médée* (1797) was an opera that had fallen into obscurity partly because of the extreme difficulty, both musically and emotionally, of the title role. Bringing the character of the infamous sorceress to life on the stage would become one of Callas's defining artistic achievements. "The Callas instrument," writes a reviewer of a 1959 recording, "has a bizarre affinity for this role and seems to sail through it. Once Medea/Callas enters, we are taken to a different sphere, one in which every note and word is filled with searing intensity. [. . .] Callas as Medea—the sorceress playing a sorceress" (Siff, 2014).

From the film adaptation that leverages the physical presence and celebrity of its leading actress, to the reviewer who sutures Callas to her role through a simple act of punctuation, the fusion between private life and public performance is easy to make. In fact, the blurring of the line between Callas, the artist, and Callas, the woman, is one of the most problematic aspects of the Callas legend. Daughter

of Greek immigrant parents, Callas was born in New York in 1923 and grew up in the shadow of a beautiful and talented older sister, Jackie. Even from a young age, it seemed like her life was played out on a stage. At 16, Callas was already performing opera professionally, the start of a career that seemed formed as much out of pure will as talent.

In Callas reception and critique, the conflation of private life and performance is exacerbated by both the operatic material that made her famous (in addition to *Medea*, she was noted for playing tragic Verdi heroines like *Lady Macbeth*, *Aida*, and *Violetta*) and her much publicized personal life: tantrums during rehearsals, broken singing engagements, the doomed love affair with Onassis, her subsequent loss of voice, and self-imposed seclusion. Correlation is easily perceived as causation—the extremes of personal experience interpreted as that which enables, and sometimes undermines, Callas’s effectiveness as a performer.

It is female singers, in particular, who seem subject to this toxic psychoanalysis, as if they cannot prevent the drama of music, the excess of singing, from bleeding over into their private lives and vice versa.¹ Callas was certainly not the first female singer subject to such speculation. When the celebrated French soprano Cornélie Falcon lost her voice, dramatically and permanently, mid-performance in 1837, vicious gossip considered the trauma punishment for an

¹Consider, for example, the quote above about Callas with the gender of the singer and role exchanged: “Bryn Terfel (Or McCormick or Pinza, or, or, or . . .) has a bizarre affinity for this role . . . Terfel as Don Giovanni—a misogynistic womanizer playing a misogynistic womanizer.”

illicit abortion. Female singers continue to be subject to the same scrutiny. Shania Twain's voice was "silenced" by her traumatic divorce from producer Mutt Lange, Christina Aguilera's melismatic flourishes are seen as signs of personal "indulgence." Beyoncé invents an alter ego, Sasha Fierce, as a prophylactic to insulate her private identity from public performances of excess and sexuality.

In Callas's case, the translation of real, into playacted, passions intersects most problematically at the publicly analyzed and imagined site of Callas's body, watershed for the intersection of the private and public: as a site for synchrony (Medea/Callas), a site with an unruly voice that must "respond to her wishes," a site of sorcery and magic. Even when it is silent on screen, this body is imbued with an expressive power all on its own. On and off the stage, bodily indications, such as weight fluctuations or inconsistencies in vocal production, become saturated with meaning, ripe for diagnosis. Too often, as scholars like Nina Sun Eidsheim have noted, these symptoms are reflected back onto Callas herself: "Callas's seeming non-conformity to 'docility and gender normalization' is punished by dismissing her vocal artistry as all 'charisma'"—an "electrical presence and 'supreme acting, unforgettable acting'" at the expense of "Callas's technical abilities and artistic agency" (Eidsheim, 249–68).

Naturally, physical and mental health have ramifications on physical activity, and thus on vocal health—it would be inadvisable, if not impossible, to attempt to disentangle the body of Callas, the private person, from Callas, the performing artist. And yet the focus on Callas's body obscures her agency as an artist and craftsman. Specifically,

the problem lies with conceiving Callas's body as a single site for the intersection of public and private, with the voice as a symptomatic Geiger counter. The mystification of Callas's vocal production reinforces this fusion even further by denying the role that technique plays in performance. Her creative labor, as a singer, is attributed to powers beyond her control. Subsequently, and significantly, she is stripped of her agency as a technician; artistry becomes a sign of vulnerability, even of hysteria, rather than a sign of mastery.

Denying women autonomy as artistic laborers is deeply embedded in historical and fictional narratives that explicate the perceived excess of the female voice. From Homer's Sirens, whose seductive voices in hideous bodies lure men to their deaths, to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *The Future Eve*, where the voice of the recalcitrant beloved is captured to be implanted in a more docile, android body (created by, of all people, a fictional Thomas Edison), the synchrony between female body and female voice is posed as undesirable, if not monstrous. More often than not, representations of the female voice serve to disenfranchise, if not completely erase, the female subject. The casual psychoanalysis of the female voice in contemporary critique, whether it be of Maria Callas or Nina Simone, continues this tradition; while shifting the nexus of vocal power onto the female subconscious, it perpetuates Romantic fantasies of artistic sublimity, of the female artist as channel or medium for divine powers. The voice, in these narratives, emerges as if by magic, and powerful characters (Medea/Callas) reflect personal experience, instead of craftsmanship.

All this is exacerbated by the inaccessibility of the voice itself. One of the greatest difficulties in evaluating technical vocal skill arises from the physical position of the voice in the body. Unlike other instruments of virtuosic prowess, like the violin or the piano, the vocal apparatus is invisible. The inability to witness the subtle, intricate manipulations of vocal production thus shrouds technique in mystery, conflating applied skill with unconscious expression. For female singers, in particular, the concealed apparatus of the voice is mirrored by the hidden apparatus of sexual reproduction, an erotic connection that, as musicologist Bonnie Gordon has explored, had consequences for female opera singers and their status on stage and in public in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This prejudice about the female voice and its perceived sexual excess still lingers in our conception of female vocality, particularly in the critical reception of female celebrity. The disempowerment of the female singer allocates interpretative control over the voice's merits onto the listener, where the voice becomes an object—stolen, possessed, caressed, and even despised. Reinstating the power of the working body in vocal production is like a fail-safe against fetishization—a constant reminder that behind every transcendent moment, there is the physical application of craft and practice of creative labor.

2

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act IV

Poveri fiori [Poor flowers]

The final act of *Adriana Lecouvreur*'s convoluted plot opens on Adriana's "name day," a holiday celebrated in some parts of Europe that follows the calendar of saints where a person receives gifts on the day of the saint whose name accords with their own. Among other luxurious gifts, such as a priceless diamond necklace, Adriana receives a mysterious casket containing a desiccated bouquet of violets. Surprised and dismayed, she recognizes them as a gift she once gave to her fickle lover. Embracing the flowers, putting them to her face to try to find a last trace of their original scent, Lecouvreur sings "Poor flowers! Buds of the meadow, born only yesterday, dying today—what oaths of a treacherous heart!" Little does she know that the violets have been soaked in poison by a romantic rival.

Hearing these two arias, "Io son l'umile ancella" and "Poveri fiori," back to back makes one wish that Callas had brought the character of Adriana Lecouvreur to life in a full production of the opera. Her characterization, even in these two brief arias, is tantalizing. Gone in this second aria are

Cilea's undulating strings, replaced by a more restrained march-like motif, but Callas's voice resonates, in the first phrases, with the same restraint as in "Io son l'umile ancella." The first octave leap is beautifully delivered, as if without effort; Callas gives the impression of intimate self-dialogue: Lecouvreur with the flowers in her hand, remembering their intention as a gift of love. As the aria progresses, Callas widens her resonance, lowering her tongue and spreading the back of the throat (like yawning), which adds breadth to her vocal timbre, that unique, slightly nasal twang in the middle range, and more force in the upper notes. The orchestra swells as if responding to her engagement; briefly, a clarinet mirrors the vocal line. With the next octave leap, Lecouvreur becomes more distraught, and yet Callas metes out melancholy with iron-like control.

Just a minute into the aria: "L'ultimo bacio, o il bacio primo?" [The last kiss, or the first kiss?] Again one feels, for lack of a better description, Callas's *face* in this sound—the soft plosive sound of the *p* and rich rolling of the *r* in "primo," the looseness of lips vibrating and coloring the voice. In the following passages, Callas unpacks all the tools at her disposal to wrest every last ounce of tragic dignity and mortified fidelity out of the musical material. The text lingers on the kiss: "soave et forte, bacio di morte, bacio d'amor" [sweet and strong, kiss of death, kiss of love]. And then, just shy of the 2-minute mark, after sinking once again into a contemplative tone, a graceful portamento on "amor" and then the briefest of sobs—no more than a quick interruption of the breath—seems to rip the character of Lecouvreur out of her memories and casts her, quite literally with the octave

leap, back into the present, back to the dying flowers in her hands and evidence of her lover's betrayal.

"Tutto è finito!" [Everything is finished!]

Lecouvreur stays alive just long enough to reunite, however briefly, with her former lover, only to die, gracefully, in his arms. Her noble sacrifice, and the hero's agonizing penitence, reiterate what is a stereotypical trope in opera narrative: the death of the soprano. Of the roughly 100 operas that are in regular repertory, 70 of them involve the death of the heroine, be it by disease, murder, or suicide. The plots of the majority of the top ten most performed operas depend upon their sacrifice. Both Violetta, the good-hearted courtesan in Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) and Giacomo Puccini's impoverished Parisian seamstress, Mimi, in *La Bohème* (1896) waste away from tuberculosis. Fickle cigarette girl Carmen is stabbed by her lover in Georges Bizet's 1875 *Carmen*. Gilda, the daughter of the titular character in Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851), is stabbed and stuffed in a sack. Cio-Cio San performs a ritual suicide upon learning of her abandonment in Puccini's 1904 *Madama Butterfly*. The acclaimed singer Floria Tosca also commits suicide, jumping to her death from the walls of Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo in *Tosca* (1900), also by Puccini. Ethiopian princess Aida is buried alive in Verdi's 1871 *Aida*, though technically this is two deaths, as her lover dies with her.

The most prominent opera to end with the lone death of the main male character is W. A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). Giovanni, who is dragged down to hell by the animated stone statue of one of his victims, is the classic anti-hero, and his death resolves the moral dilemma caused by

his refusal to repent for his sins. Giovanni, a baritone, is an exception in more ways than one. Heroes in the most popular operas, almost always tenors, have a much better chance of survival than their soprano counterparts.

Maria Callas, who obeyed the death imperative in so many of her roles, died quietly of heart failure on September 16, 1977, at her flat in Paris, France. She was 53 years old and had not appeared on stage in four years.

Even in death, the singer was conflated with the tragic heroines she brought to life on stage. French producer Michel Glotz remarked that her corpse “was the image itself of ‘La Traviata’ as she performed it in 1956 at Milan’s La Scala. There was not a line on her face. It seems like she was just resting” (Webster, 2014).

Performance artist Marina Abramović, who has confessed to a long obsession with the diva, recently premiered her own offering on the Callas altar in September 2020 at the Bayrische Staatsoper in Munich. For the first part of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Abramović, who perfected the art of immobility a decade earlier in her well-known performance *The Artist is Present* at the MoMA in New York City, lies unresponsive in bed in a reproduction of Callas’s Paris bedroom. On a screen above the stage set play a series of seven liberal interpretations of Callas’s most famous death scenes, featuring Abramović and actor Willem Defoe. As each aria, voiced by an onstage singer, unfolds, the onscreen Abramović depicts versions of operatic death in the guise of Callas. The performance artist, at this stage in her life, bears an uncanny resemblance to the departed soprano, so much

so that one wonders if she is trying to morph, slowly, into the diva. Slow motion, fluffy clouds, and the use of pythons as a weapon lend these depictions a palpable pathos that borders on kitsch.

When Callas's voice is finally heard, singing "Casta diva" from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831), Abramović, clad extravagantly in gold sequins, mimes emphatic gestures on the stage. Her mouth may be closed, but this is nonetheless karaoke—not of performance but of legend. Endeavoring to further superimpose herself onto the romanticized legacy of the opera singer, Abramović recently commented: "She [Callas] didn't want to live anymore . . . She actually died for love, and I almost died for love, so I understand what it means." On the ubiquity of death for operatic heroines, the artist insists that these deaths are "more dramatic, more beautiful" (Anderson, 2020) than any man's.

Certainly, even in death it is more appealing to continue to conflate Callas with her operatic heroines, to imagine she died of a broken heart rather than of the more mundane consequences of eating disorders and nervous exhaustion, to see her rejuvenated, transformed on her deathbed into the image of one of her most famous tragic heroines. Her death becomes "more dramatic, more beautiful," and the damage caused by a ruthless regime of body modification, as well as the autonomy and self-control such a regime demands, is erased. Like the many operatic heroines she brought to life on stage, Callas is imagined as a sacrifice on the altar of love, helpless to resist the forces of love and destiny.

In her 1979 book *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, the French philosopher and novelist Catherine Clément

performs a poetic autopsy of the sacrificial operatic narrative to diagnose the pathological misogyny that underpins the genre. Fatal operatic plot devices often titillate with their ingenuity: a conveniently cast serial killer (*Lulu/Elizabeth Cree*), a suicidal leap (*Tosca/Written on Skin*), death by dance (*Electra*), or a cauldron of boiling water (*La Juive*). Pulsing under all this theatrical sensationalism, however, is a sanctimonious undercurrent. Heroines may be the focal point of the drama, but they have no control over their fate. Death is a moralistic imperative, correcting the wrongs of fallen women, punishing the vanities of fickle lovers and abusive fathers, snuffing out incestuous longings. Opera, Clément implies, is a didactic exercise, reiterating the trope, over and over again, of the woman sacrificed for our pleasure, for our good, for her own good, until it becomes commonplace.

As a means to expose the insidious creativity of these fatal narratives, Clément condemns an unlikely suspect: the music. She reviles music as an “obscuring fog” that allows for a “risk-free identification” (Clément, 9); music wraps all misogynistic violence in a beautiful haze; a kind of operatic “miracle,” this sonic honey disguises the bitter, woman-killing pill swallowed by the opera acolyte.

According to Clément, the only way to reveal the misogyny inherent within the art form is to strip away the comforting sonic swaddling that shields such narratives from critique. Then, and only then, can one perhaps begin to enjoy opera again, leery of the music lest it make one forget what is *really* being enacted on the stage. And yet opera is not simply a dichotomy between words and music, librettist and composer. Wedged between them is perhaps the single most

identifying factor of the genre: the singing performer and the operatic voice.

The singing voice is allocated both lexical and musical liminality—it hovers between music and text, orchestra and stage plot. As an expressive technique that prioritizes resonance over articulation, singing hinders the expression of lexical signifiers (i.e., singing blurs the text). Paradoxically, it is this very association with language, and with the body, that makes the voice an outsider instrument when compared with orchestral instruments that express “pure” musical sound. So while the singing voice is *the* identifying sonic attribute, and musical instrument, of the operatic genre, it is also implicated in the labor of language, regardless of whether some of the lexical content is distended, repeated, or obscured. The operatic singing voice is both a musical and linguistic delivery system, constantly negotiating and suturing the lexical and narrative implications of the text with the more diffuse, affect-driven musical material.

This means the operatic voice is both part and parcel of what Clément is seeking to expose and condemn. The operatic song is both text and music; it expresses and obscures, articulates and resonates. Singing formalizes narrative gestures and context within the expressive framework of music. This process is transformative rather than reductive; rather than obfuscate the violence of the plot, as Clément claims, operatic singing abstracts it, *becomes* it. The undone women of these femicidal plots are expressed purely as vocal presence—they are more cry than character. As such, it is imperative to look to the voice, not merely the text, to fully understand the implications of the symbolic woman’s ritualized operatic “undoing.”

In his seminal volume *The Voice in Cinema* (1982), French cultural theorist Michel Chion diagnoses the dramatic vortex of what he designates “the screaming point,” a cinematic event that hinges on the opened female mouth, the gaping hole from which the spontaneous cry emerges. In Chion’s account, this crucial moment is inextricably bound to the cinematic narrative; it exerts a kind of climactic, centripetal force on the space-time fabric of the film. At the event horizon of this black hole scream, all the contradictions of aesthetic representation collide. The scream is a vacuum that is both meaningless and all meaning, timeless and yet temporally definitive. It is both the void of death, and naked, visceral life.

Chion emphasizes that the event of the scream in the narrative arc supersedes the importance of the sonic event, that is to say, the actual *sound* of the scream is not of particular importance. Cinema, as Chion stresses in the introduction to the book, is a *voco-centric* medium—just as in opera, the voice is privileged over all other sonic elements. However, unlike opera, film is not just *voco-centric*, it is also a *lexi-centric* medium. Nonlinguistic vocalities where the voice is pure sound, such as the scream, tend to be absorbed into the sonic soundscape of the film. In Chion’s two examples, Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Brian de Palma’s *Blow Out* (1981), the actual sound of the scream is literally underscored as it is subsumed by the film music.

Pino Donaggio’s lush, operatic soundtrack for *Blow Out* anticipates the heroine’s scream with theatrical precision. An ascending, modulating string motif and tremolo strings map onto the visual action of the pursuit scene, in which the hero

is trying to save the heroine from the hands of the Liberty Bell Strangler. In the moment before her death, Donaggio balances the force of her scream with forte blasts of strings and horns and the gong of the Liberty Bell, a macabre punctuation that distributes the impact of the dying heroine's scream across the cinematic environment, as if the entire landscape becomes her suffering body.

In *Psycho*, on the other hand, the crucial scream scene starts almost in silence; we hear only the sound of the water falling on porcelain. Marion's mouth is open, but silent, perhaps to catch some of the droplets, or open in pleasure at the sensation of the water against her skin. Bernard Herrmann's notorious, repetitive marcato string motive erupts into the cinemascapes as we see Norman's shadow. When Marion's scream finally emerges it is barely audible, secondary to the incessant, stabbing strings. The music overwhelms the scream itself—with each thrust of the strings, the scream is pushed, with aesthetic violence, back into Marion's body.

And yet, a scream is nothing if not sonic—so why then is the cinematic screaming point in particular, absorbed into the non-diegetic sounds of these films, as if extracted from the narrative sound environment within which the characters exist? The repression, or even smothering, of the female scream appears to be a functional trait within Chion's diagnostic, one that distinguishes the screaming point from other, ordinary recorded screams. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), essayist and literary critic Elaine Scarry remarks on the recurrence of the scream in the visual arts, observing that this nonauditory

manifestation of the scream is, in fact, more accurate in depicting the excess of the body at its limits. The open mouth, silent and fixed, becomes a symbol of that which is incomprehensible but feasible.

In film, with its lexical focus, a naked scream would present too much finality, too much rupture. The nature of the screaming point is that it *exceeds* the actual scream of the woman, it becomes part of the environment, of space and time. It is the moment when the woman's open mouth becomes a vortex of *all sound* and thus all meaning. From a purely sonic standpoint, the screaming point is highly orchestrated, even musical. It becomes a suture, and a rupture, between the diegetic and non-diegetic cinematic sound fields. It reaches out. It captivates.

The screaming point, for all its lack of vocal autonomy, is the most operatic trope in cinema; it is the reduction/translation of a specific operatic moment, what I am calling the *sound zero* of the doomed soprano, the catastrophic release of the so-called "high note." Even those unfamiliar with opera recognize the soprano's high note as indicative of the genre.

Just as all screams are not screaming points, however, not all high notes create sound zero. There is a specific type of vocal expression that indicates the expanse, the forceful vortex, of this sound. While its specific qualities might be subjective, this moment of extreme vocality is an essential phenomenon within the genre. As the sonic hypocenter of the operatic event, sound zero exerts multiple levels of gravity within the operatic medium: within an aria, within an opera, within critique. It forms the apex of a melody, the event

horizon of the narrative, an object of desire and scrutiny for attentive listeners and obsessives. Conversely, the sound itself seems to expand outwards, breaking the resonant caul of the performance like a sonic boom. For opera aficionados, the quality of this sound is what distinguishes good sopranos from great sopranos, a well-executed note from a moment of allocation and transcendence. Like Chion's screaming point, it evokes both the void of death, and naked, visceral life. The operatic voice in the moment of sound zero simultaneously fulfills and delimits its own fatal teleology; it is both indicative of the final death scream, and an excessive expression of bodily presence.

In *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (1992), French cultural critic Michel Poizat defines the sound of this extreme moment as an operatic *pure* or *sheer cry*, "a paroxysmal vocal emission beyond the range of music and out of reach of the word" (76). According to Poizat, the transcendent power of the pure cry is linked, through a metaphysics of absence, to the fugitive cry of pure resonance that eludes signification. It is a vocal object, in the Lacanian sense, that wants or exemplifies nothing, and thus, becomes all meaning. It is the first, lost vocal object of *jouissance*. As the place where the idea of the eternal feminine, Woman, and the lost vocal object, Voice, collide, the cry achieves transcendent qualities, becoming the Voice of the Goddess, the Cry of the Angel.

The manifestation of this moment is not arbitrary; as Poizat remarks, "the pure cry must be intended by the composer, precisely situated in the musical and dramatic development of the work, and may be prepared for by the

orchestral or vocal material that immediately precedes it, and it will completely determine . . . the musical or vocal content that immediately follows it.” (76) This is also a moment of physical transformation, in which the contours of the singer herself dissolve, the moment where “the diva on stage begins to *make herself pure voice* for the jouissance of the spectator” (186—italics my own). The pure cry, to follow Poizat, effaces the singer and the singing body, as if the absolute signification of the sound, with its black hole function, gobbles up the site of production as it penetrates the listening ear.

Certainly, the groundwork for such an event must be laid in the score, but no composer can completely determine the emergence of what Poizat dubs “the pure cry.” They can certainly prepare the way for the extreme, but the manifestation of the sound zero/pure cry depends entirely on the disposition and applied technique of the singer—rather than a transformation into “pure voice,” the singer is part and parcel of this moment and its affect. As such, I resist defining this as a moment of vocal objectification, whereby the symbolic extraction of the voice from the producing body erases the productive autonomy of the singer. To fragment the site of production, even symbolically, fulfills a particularly masculine fantasy of fetishization. In an effort to redistribute the power allocated to this moment from the composer and the interpretant back onto the performer, I argue that this moment is always bound to the singing body, not as a symbolic site of emergence, superimposed femininity, or fantasy, but as a site of artistic labor.

It should be noted that the sound zero effect, like its cinematic counterpart, cannot be produced by just *any*

singing body. Both phenomena are definitively coded as feminine. For Chion, the male scream delimits a space, or marks a territory; it creates presence, power, and structure, while the woman's scream gestures toward an absolute, the infinite, and all meaning.

Of course, many of the sublime associations projected onto the female voice in the moment of extreme vocalization are culturally defined, as Poizat explains. And yet, because of the specificities of singing itself, some of these qualities are also unique to operatic vocalization and defined by technique. The sound quality of the cinematic screaming point, as previously mentioned, is largely irrelevant—it is the role of this moment in the fabric of the film that makes the event unique. In opera, on the other hand, sound zero is an essentially sonic phenomenon, and it is female. There is a distinction between the operatic high-notes of biologically determined male and female bodies which is grounded in vocal physiology and subsequent singing technique. One need not know all the technological specifics to hear that there is a difference between the heroine and hero in a moment of extreme vocalization.

The specificity of contemporary male operatic singing style illustrates what Chion can only gesture toward with his speculation about masculine screams in film. The operatic hero's loud, high note is a sonic delimitation of power and presence—it functions just like the masculine cinematic scream, but is sonically specific and the result of how tenor and baritone voices are trained. The masculine heroic high note relies on tightly controlled air pressure and the attenuation of the chest voice to create an impression of

bodily tension and force. In this tone we can almost feel the strenuous tightening of the glutes, the puffing expansion of the chest and tucking of the chin, the air pressure within the lungs and throat. The sound is tight and pointed, even constipated, as if the voice has lodged in the nasal cavity. The voice in this moment is a means of grounding and sexual display, a primal “yawlp” drawing attention to the hero’s body and presence.

The sound zero event of the female voice occurs in the upper register of the head voice and relies less on muscle than on vocal placement and modification of resonance to create volume and intensity. Many sopranos report a feeling of weightlessness when singing at this extreme register and volume, as if the sound barely needs any air pressure to achieve full force. Unlike the hero’s high note, the sound zero of the soprano seems to exceed the control of the body, to swell and expand beyond the reaches of mouth and breath. The instability, and excess, of this event is something that tenor and baritone voices, simply because of technique, are unable to achieve.

Singing high notes, for a singer of any range, is risky. The negotiation of air pressure, sound placement, and resonance is essential; any miscalculation can lead to the voice ‘cracking’ or ‘breaking’ while singing. The female singer’s work of precise vocal placement and delivery in creating the extreme moment is essential. Unlike the screaming point in a film, the effectiveness of the sound zero moment is entirely dependent upon vocal skill; a singer mixes and edits their own voice, and there are no repeat takes in live recording or performance.

A consistency of technique, however, doesn't necessarily mean that critics will always agree on which singer evokes this transcendent feeling. But while the listening experience evoked by a sound zero moment is subjective, the persistence of the discourse about the transcendent female high note in opera reiterates the importance of this moment as a phenomenon. The popularity of, and cult following around, a singer like Callas reinforces her reputation as a skilled manufacturer of extreme, transformative vocality. More importantly, her expression of this sound is not only singular but also consistent, indicating a deliberate deployment of her extreme voice within the vocal line.

In the aria "Poveri fiori," for example, Callas delivers an achingly delicate G5 within seconds of beginning to sing. Her command of air pressure is remarkable, and the sound is beautiful, shy even, but not infinite; one can hear restraint, control, fragility. Any singer will know how difficult this effect is to achieve, how deliberate the technique required to create such a seemingly effortless sound. For the listener, this high note is a lure, of sorts; it offers a sonic taste of the Callas instrument, a fraction of potential.

Again, almost immediately, she sings a reiteration of that same note, this time more dilated, both in volume and timbre. Callas is beginning to shade the vocal line with her palette of vocal colors. The breadth of this palette is astounding, from dark to light, warm to cold, laid on in thick strokes or with pointillistic precision. More than other singers, Callas seems unashamed of what might be deemed 'ugly' qualities of the sound—guttural vibrations of the lips and cheeks. These

frame, rather than detract, from the beauty of sustained tones and floated high notes.

The contrast between resonance of flesh and bone, mouth and hard palate, are fully under Callas's control. As if wielding a sonic kaleidoscope, she is able to refract and manipulate her tone to great affect; from one moment to the next, she sounds like two different singers, just as here, on this repeated high note, we catch a sound byte of a different Callas. This voice is more mature, broader than the previous floated note. At 2'28" the glimpse of what I describe as sound zero: just for a moment the vocal timbre has a metallic shimmer, the vibrato pulse verges on instability. The full potential of this vocal color, however, is not fulfilled; Callas draws back. Her instincts are impeccable. The tone of the aria is reflective, almost dream-like, and fully unleashing the power of her voice would rupture the reverie. Instead, she only gestures toward the infinite—a deathly teaser, of sorts.

Listening ahead to the next track on the album, Umberto Giordano's "La mamma morta" from *Andrea Chénier* (1896), grants the listener a more concrete manifestation of Callas's most extreme voice. There is considerable buildup to this moment in the aria. She gets closer and closer to this sound, circling around it, testing the vocal waters until at last, at 4'30", the voice explodes out of the musical texture of the orchestration. The orchestra holds its breath, as does the listener. Time seems suspended. The voice detonates with the force of a bomb. There is a pulse around the fringes of the sound, almost a bleat, that immediately conjures images of the singing body, the open mouth, the dark cavern of the throat, jaw cracked wide. Concurrently, this pulse gives a

kind of febrile agency to the voice itself, as if the vibrato were the voice beating its fists on the walls of its prison, longing to escape. This cry is compelling, and frightening—our ears are drawn to it like eyes to a car crash.

One wonders, in the sound zero moment, that if Callas were to sing long enough and loud enough whether the voice would leap out of her body and soar out of her grasp. It already seems halfway there, after all, in this moment of crisis, as it reaches out into the audience to capture our listening ears. The sound zero event is a moment of *extimacy*, an externalized intimacy in the Lacanian sense. It is an empathetic demand. The frequency strikes like a psychological tuning fork on the listening body. The moment of synchrony and impression of infinity, however, are brief. Like an explosion in outer space, the sound expands and then contracts. When the voice snaps back into Callas's body, when the cry is ended, it also draws us with it, back into the frame of the opera, and into the singing.

As if to accentuate the physical force with which she has to get the sound under control, Callas's vocalization after the moment of crisis in "La mamma morta" is guttural, even ugly, the excess of the high note pulled back to her body with esophageal force—but these next notes seem almost irrelevant. One can still hear that unique sound ringing in our ears. Even before it has ended, one longs for it again.

On a concert album like this that showcases dramatic arias, Callas visits the edge of this vortex again and again, articulating sublime moments nestled into the musical fabric of the artwork. Each aria offers small, distilled *petit morts*. The soprano's song is both anticipation of death, and death

itself, an aesthetic transmogrification and dilation of that last moment.

The narrative violence of the libretto pales, even seems ridiculous, when compared with the force of this vocal event. After all, singing is not acting, and arias are not monologues. Singing is body music, embodied music. Death, here, is not narrative. It is inscribed, articulated by the singing voice in this moment of extreme vocality. As such, it eludes and exceeds the limits of a specific narrative; all the dead women of opera plots merge into one. The sound zero event of operatic heroines like Puccini's Mimi, Giordano's Maddalena, Verdi's Tosca, and Catalani's Wally all merge in the iteration of the sound, in the black hole ripped open in the performance.

Emphasizing the technical agency of the female singer in the creation of the sound zero event can define artistic labor, but without these specificities, it is too easy to conflate the power of the moment with the psyche of the singer. In the case of Callas, the creation of the vocal extremes of all these doomed characters haunts the diva herself, as if the singing of the extreme has its own special gravity, melding singer and moment, conflating those heroines' lives with her own personal triumphs and tragedies, provoking the mystification of her ordinary, quiet death.

3

Giordano, *Andrea Chénier*, Act III

La mamma morta [Mother is dead]

Andrea Chénier, an opera in four acts by Umberto Giordano (1867–1948) with a text by prolific opera librettist Luigi Illica, premiered in Milan in 1896. Like *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Andrea Chénier* is loosely based on the life of a legendary eighteenth-century French artist. André de Chénier (1762–94) was an idealistic poet who lost his life to the guillotine only days before the end of the French Revolution.

As with the dramatization of Adrienne Lecouvreur's life, the opera about Chénier takes more than considerable liberties with his biography. The character that Callas is embodying here, for example, the aristocratic Maddalena de Coigny, has no basis in fact but is crucial as the disputed love interest in the opera plot. In this scene, Maddalena is about to give her body to another man to save the life of her lover, Chénier. She describes, in great detail, the death of her mother, the burning of her childhood home at the hands of revolutionaries, and how her love for Chénier sustained her through impoverishment and grief.

For several decades, this was the only official recording of Callas singing the role of Maddalena, though a bootleg (or an ‘underground’ in opera parlance) of an entire performance at La Scala in 1955 made the rounds until EMI gave it an official release twenty-five years after the soprano’s death. Legend has it that tenor Mario del Monaco, afraid that Callas would upstage him in the scheduled production of Verdi’s *Il trovatore* (1853), pled an indisposition and requested that the Verdi opera be switched out for *Andrea Chénier*, knowing that Callas did not have the role in her repertoire. Callas, not one to be intimidated, is said to have learned the opera in five days, a task that normally takes weeks of preparation. She gave six performances of the role and, by all accounts, sang del Monaco up against a wall.

“La mamma morta” has a complex dramaturgy that unfolds slowly and steadily, making it treacherous to perform. It demands consummate craft and nuance to maintain both its vocal and narrative tension. The events in Maddalena’s tale create dramatic vignettes that work almost like a dialogue—each recollection has its own particular tone and pace that emerge as she remembers. The protracted nature of the aria, as well as the dramatic intensity Callas lends to this particular performance, make it a fitting soundtrack for an equally operatic scene in Jonathan Demme’s 1993 film *Philadelphia*, where the fear and trauma of Revolutionary France are translated into the more contemporary context of the AIDS crisis. The events and emotions in this particular moment in the film are grafted, to great effect, onto the structure and drama of Callas’s performance.

In the scene, the main character, Andrew Beckett, played by Tom Hanks, is in a meeting at home with his lawyer, Joe Miller, played by Denzel Washington. Beckett, a lawyer himself, is attempting to sue his former firm for discrimination and unlawful termination based on his sexual orientation and HIV/AIDS diagnosis. After initially rejecting the case because of his own latent homophobia and misunderstandings about the disease, Miller has reluctantly become Beckett's council.

The scene opens in Beckett's living room; there are candles, a fire has been lit; very faintly we hear the opening strains of the aria from *Andrea Chénier*.

"Do you mind this music? Do you like opera?" Beckett asks, eyes half closed.

Miller seems somewhat baffled at the question. Hesitatingly, he answers, "I am not that familiar with opera, Andrew . . ."

The opening music that has been setting the mood, innocuously, in the background suddenly gains presence as Maria Callas's voice enters.

"It's Maria Callas," Andrew says, as if introducing her to Miller. A brief frontal shot of Miller's face captures his blank, even impatient, expression.

Beckett rises from his seat as if compelled by the music. The camera moves to film him from above, obscuring his expression from the viewer. For the remainder of the scene, when we see Beckett, it is from this angle, with the camera constantly in motion; the camera on Miller, on the other hand, is almost static.

"This is Maddalena," Beckett says. His fingers touch the amplifier and the volume increases. His hand moves away.

With his face obscured, the hand that has touched the amplifier, that has received the music, is transformed, within the cinematic frame, into the most expressive part of Beckett's body. Slowly, while explaining the text, Beckett becomes a kind of a Callas/Maddalena (suture deliberate) avatar. The emotive hand hovers just an inch from Beckett's brow before it moves to grasp the stand for his IV drip.

"Can you hear the heartache in her voice?" Beckett asks Miller. "Can you feel it, Joe?"

We see Miller, looking over his shoulder now, watching Beckett. Miller's expression is no longer impatient, but weary, or perhaps pitying. He has given up on leaving and resigned himself to humoring his client. One can see the moment where Miller actually begins to listen, if not quite yet to "feel"—a slight lifting of the brows, as if in consideration.

The camera is again gazing down at Beckett, who explains, "Now in come the strings and it changes everything. The music, it fills with a hope, but that'll change again: Listen!"

Beckett shakes his head, eyes closed. "Listen," he repeats, as he begins, again, to channel Callas.

"I bring sorrow to those who love me." His face suddenly contorts into a rictus of pleasure and pain, and he croaks out, "Oh! That single cello!"

Callas's voice reenters; we are watching Miller, listening, but hear Beckett's voice: "It was during this sorrow that love came to me."

At this moment there is a sudden, dramatic shift in the lighting that converts the living room into a stage set. Callas's voice floats through the air and both Miller, and then Beckett, are cast into shadow. Beckett's expressive hand,

illuminated by a white spotlight, rises and makes contact with his forehead.

“A voice, filled with harmony . . .” Beckett says, eyes closed.

The red-gold light of the fire that has been flickering away in the fireplace behind Miller’s left shoulder begins to suffuse the entire room. When we see Beckett again, this red light surrounds his body.

“It said live—still! I am life—heaven is in your arms,” Beckett continues, his voice catching in his throat. From the superior camera angle, it looks as though Beckett is burning at the stake, or sinking into hellfire. The red is almost too saturated to be firelight; it takes on a ghoulish glow, like light percolating through blood.

Miller is slowly coming under the spell of the music; his face, now completely shrouded in shadow, is almost unreadable as Callas’s voice strives toward the operatic apex. Callas’s vocal timbre becomes more fraught, voluminous. The red light begins to reflect off of Miller’s face, revealing what looks like the hint of a tear welling above the lower lid of his right eye.

For the moment, Beckett has stopped channeling Callas, as if the transmission were too much to bear, and the voice sings for itself. He is weeping. The camera turns back to Miller, zooming in until his stoic face nearly fills the screen.

Again Beckett, filmed from above. “It’s everything around you,” he translates, “the blood and the mud. I am divine. I am oblivion. I am the God that comes down from the heavens to the earth, that makes of earth a heaven.”

Miller’s face, slightly raised and bathed in warm light, has taken on a beatific radiance. His lips part slightly.

Callas reaches the vocal climax, the sound zero, of the aria; Beckett clenches his fist as if to grab on to the sound, “I am love.” He says, “I am love.”

The aria ends, normal light returns, and Beckett stands panting as if from great physical exertion. Miller, clearly uncomfortable from what he has witnessed, gives an embarrassed laugh and starts to thrust papers into his briefcase. “I better get out of here,” he blusters.

Something has been triggered in this scene, and the aria was the catalyst. Most viewers will understand, implicitly, the type of transformation taking place during the progress of the aria. All the aspects familiar in Judeo-Christian religious conversion are here: a prophet, a wash of otherworldly light, and a bodiless, musical voice that conveys more than just lexical content. This voice is *other*, and it works on the soul the way mere words cannot. St. Augustine, who was brought to his conversion by the androgynous singsong of an unseen child; Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century English mystic who had rapturous visions of heavenly voices and song; the divine light that strikes St. Paul, Symeon the New Theologian, and even Philip K. Dick. Light and music are key elements in encounters with metaphysical presence, of an eruption of the divine into the mundane. Like light, the sung voice has immersive and directional qualities that fulfill conversion eschatology. As Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar notes, the “spontaneous teleology” that the voice invokes, “goes hand and hand with a certain theology of the voice as the revelation of the word” (Dolar, in Trummer, 32).

Despite these overtly Christian overtones (one could even imagine that Beckett embodies a kind of Christian martyr in the middle of the scene, burning at the stake for translating and spreading the aria/word), this is not a specifically religious scene. It mirrors many of the traits of religious conversion, but the religiosity of the conversion paradigm has been secularized; *Philadelphia* is as much a reckoning with the AIDS pandemic as it is the parable of one man's journey from bigotry to enlightenment.

The role that opera plays in this scene is crucial. On the one hand, opera, as a broad cultural stereotype, represents the many layers of difference between the two characters: that opera is serious and elite, its meaning elusive and dependent on education, upbringing, and, as is implied here, sexual orientation. Inscrutable, inaccessible, powerful—opera represents the social, sexual, and cultural rift between Beckett and Miller.

Beckett is clearly the more receptive to the Callas revelation; like a medium at a séance, the disembodied voice works through him, speaks through him. His love of opera, its excess and flamboyance, affirms particular stereotypes about culture and sexuality, as if the social liminality and physical precarity of his illness make him more susceptible to the aesthetic forces of art. (No one has explored this subject more thoroughly and poignantly than Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen's Throat*, published the same year that this film was released.) Miller, quite aptly named Joe, represents, in contrast, the average guy. Untutored and perhaps, as his first comments imply, slightly suspicious or even resentful of opera as a genre, Miller plays a hetero-masculine, and

pointedly African American, counterpoint to Beckett's Caucasian, gay devotion.

While opera represents, on several levels, the cultural gulf between the two main characters, it also performs the very labor of overcoming this rift. Beckett's reaction to the music, his alliance with the voice of Callas, works to activate the music in the scene. His hand, in particular, makes contact with the music, not unlike the hand raised to receive the Holy Spirit in evangelical worship services. He touches the vibrations of the air and brings them to his own forehead, as if to funnel the energy to himself. When he speaks, he aligns his own voice with Callas's; he is both translator and receiver, an enthusiastic missionary.

There are moments when the aria bleeds over into the air, quite literally saturating the room with *klangfarbe* [sound-color] of blood and fire. In the aria, the character Maddalena remembers the pillaging and burning of her childhood home, her loyal servant forced into prostitution to save them both. The operatic memory becomes a sensory event, activated by the operatic voice. Beckett and Miller, as they succumb to the power of the music, become embedded in the fabric of the drama. The artificiality of the dramatic lighting shift thrusts them, quite visually, into the theatricality of the operatic moment, as if they, too, in listening to Callas, become like the singer Callas as she brings this moment for Maddalena to life, the memory of blood and fire.

"I am divine," gasps Beckett, channeling Callas, who is interpreting Maddalena, who is speaking for love. And yet there is also the presence of Callas, the singer, hovering around this phrase: Callas, *La Divina*: "I am divine!"

The aria performs a specific metaphysical labor in this scene that could not have been achieved otherwise. Conversion is not an act of will, it is a recognition and a submission to forces that have been ignored or unrecognized until that moment. Conversion occurs through acquiescence, through *listening*. The aria is a vehicle for the sublime, and as it unfolds within the scene it works to reveal some kind of absolute truth. Through the ears, the eyes are opened. At the center of this event, of course, is the named presence, invoked as if in a séance: Maria Callas, high priestess of the genre, cultural totem for tragedy and sacrifice.

The first two operas represented on the album, *Andrea Chénier* and *Adriana Lecouvreur*, are both considered examples of the late nineteenth-century style of Italian opera dubbed “verismo,” quite literally, “realism,” or, as it relates to its Latin etymology (*verax/verus*), “truthfulness.” The new opera genre, if it can even be called that, was ostensibly modeled on a literary movement fronted by Sicilian author Giovanni Carmelo Verga (1840–1922), whose short story became the basis for one of the most famous Verismo operas, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) by Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945).

According to the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, Verismo (capitalized here to emphasize the concept as a genre) shares stylistic traits with naturalism; it is interested in working-class narratives and a “true-to-life” approach while also focusing on regional characteristics, such as local songs and dialects. Vocal lines in Verismo operas eschew elaborate ornamentation in favor of straightforward, lyric melodies that help to shape emotional vignettes. No longer the

showpieces within the opera frame, arias have equal status with ensembles and conversational interludes, strengthening narrative and dramatic continuity throughout the opera.

Despite the specificity of these traits, many operas considered part of the Verismo genre don't align with these characteristics. *Andrea Chénier* and *Adriana Lecouvreur*, for example, certainly don't focus on a plebeian or regional aspect of eighteenth-century French life. Other than their loose association with two historical figures, the operas hardly depict a "true-to-life" narrative, instead opting to alter and milk the tragic fates of their main characters for dramatic effect. Highlighting working-class characters didn't begin at the end of the nineteenth century—one need only recall Figaro, the impudent servant in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786). In addition, regional dances like the tarantella were already being included in Italian opera in the first half of the century.

So what, then, is verismo? Even *Grove* admits that it's "a misleading and inadequate term for turn-of-the-century Italian opera." Part of the challenge seems to be in defining distinct stylistic traits, many of which aren't unique to the genre or are contradicted by the very works that bear the name. The other obstacle has to do with opera itself. As a highly conventionalized and formal art form, opera is an incongruous vehicle for any movement dedicated to truth and realism. The music, and in particular, the singing, get in the way of any conventional form of realism. The highly stylized aspects of vocal delivery obfuscate discourse. As realistic as a narrative, or libretto dialect, may be, it must take second place to the musical prerogative of the singing voice.

Perhaps all of these difficulties arise from attempting to suture the operatic style with the ethos of the literary movement with which it shares a name. As many music historians have pointed out, none more emphatically than Egon Voss, Verismo genre operas have little, if anything at all, in common with the traits and ideology of the literary movement.

Nonetheless, both literary verismo and the desire for an operatic equivalent reflect a particular shift in thinking about the role and effectivity of the work of art at the end of the nineteenth century. Music historian Andreas Giger contends that operatic verismo was more indicative of a longer process of change during the second half of the century, rather than the emergence of a cohesive cadre of composers and works. Giger notes a long break with operatic conventions and harmonies as subject matter and choice of language redefined Italian opera over a period of half a century. Singing style changed as well; influenced by the more emotive, naturalistic style of acting perpetuated by Eléonore Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, sopranos Emma Calvé and Gemma Bellincioni fostered a new style of singing that widened the expressive palette of vocal color and gestures. Bellincioni, in particular, was not afraid to sacrifice purity of tone or the pursuit of technical perfection to milk a melodic line for emotional effect.

The prolific opera composer Giuseppe Verdi once quipped, “To copy the truth is one thing, but to invent it is much better” (Verdi, in St. John Brenon, 151). Verdi, it can be surmised, was not advocating the creation of a science fiction, a false reality, but a more subtle translation

of the experience of truth into the abstract form of art: following the philosopher Martin Heidegger, an art that one encounters, not as an object, but as a presence-ing [*anwesen*] that enables a certain primordial encounter and engagement with existence.

If verismo in opera is centered around a shift in musical textures that foster a new kind of evocative performance style, striving to inspire a more “truthful” emotional dialogue with the listener, then vocal expression, as the centering force of the art form, is essential. The effectiveness of a verismo feeling evoked by the sung voice lies primarily in the expressive use of vocal effects to both display and elicit emotional response. As a result, contemporary singers who pursue such roles are often judged more for their emotive than technical capabilities.

A recent album by Russian star soprano Anna Netrebko, entitled simply *Verismo* (DG 2016), has received several lukewarm reviews, none of which criticize her vocal color or quality, but rather her perceived lack of expression. One critic notes a “basic lack of engagement with the characters involved, a one-size-fits-all approach that makes little of the words, which communicates little of the emotional extremes these arias should convey” (Shirley, 2017). Another critic’s verdict: “Russian soprano thrills but doesn’t always touch the heart” (Dart, 2016). I, too, find myself indifferent to Netrebko’s charms. To channel a perhaps apocryphal Callas, after hearing a recording by rival Renata Tebali: “What a lovely voice, but who cares?”

When it comes to “truthful” singing, the effectivity of the vocal expression lies in the ear of the acculturated listener.

Verismo, rather than a coherent style or narrative, becomes an elusive master signifier. The emotive power of verismo performance style lies in a sensation of “truthiness”¹ beyond any approximation of reality; it evokes a sense of being witness to authenticity, even when that authenticity is filtered and formed by layers upon layers of artistic conventions. On the contrary, for an ear under the spell of the verismo voice, the conventions of opera don’t obscure some kind of truth but assist in revealing it, as if technique were the means of stripping the voice of all kinds of lexical and paralinguistic baggage to assist in the deployment of real, true expression.

The emotional, effect-laden style of singing that emerged out of a veristic turn in opera has overflowed the boundaries of its repertoire and become an operatic standard. That the style is now ubiquitous is due in part to the dominance of Verismo operas on the stage. For the most recent season available on OperaBase, a website that gathers statistics from over 900 theaters around the globe, more than half of the most performed operas in the world are in the Verismo tradition. The preference for this style also reflects a certain desire projected onto the singing voice: that singing transmits, more purely, some kind of primal veracity. The sound zero event, for example, and all that it suggests and reveals, is part of the verismo palette.

Despite its current cultural dominance, it must be noted that the verismo style of singing is certainly not the only style of

¹This term was coined by late-night host Stephen Colbert in 2005 to criticize the use of emotional appeal, in lieu of facts, in political discourse.

vocal expression. As the title of this Callas album suggests (*Lyric and Coloratura Arias*), there are styles of arias that demand different techniques and vocal effects. Lyric is a broad term that implies voice type as well as style. A lyric soprano is the average operatic soprano voice; according to *Grove*, a lyric soprano voice lies somewhere between a light and a dramatic soprano (again rather vague terms), and is noted for its suppleness and beauty of tone. Coloratura is much more specific. Despite its historical connotation with certain periods and types of music, the term “coloratura” has come to encompass all vocal ornamentation and florid embellishment in classical singing.

The concept of verismo in opera only really gained authority as a formal musical term long after Callas recorded this album, as musicologist Egon Voss explains in an article from the late 1970s. Nevertheless, the first five lyric arias on this album are decidedly veristic in style, and Callas’s performance technique is in the service of emotional affect; the manipulation of text, timbre, color, and volume work to create an abstract, sonic portrait of each character in the moment of emotional excess.

The last four arias, on the other hand, showcase Callas’s mastery of coloratura technique—the arias are peppered with rapid runs, trills, clusters of repeated ornamentation, popped high notes. Coloratura, like an Olympic gymnastic routine, demands precision and seamless movement. The conjunct motion and rapidity of the ornamentation exposes any vocal inconsistency or flaw. In contrast to verismo arias, all this energy works less to create an emotional impression of the sung character than to celebrate the voice itself as a flexible and virtuosic instrument.

Listening to perfectly executed coloratura inspires appreciation, even awe, but not necessarily an emotional connection. Even the most well-known of coloratura flight of fancy, the Queen of the Night's "Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen" from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791), with its punishing one-note staccato of doom and high-pitched, ping-pong vocal rage acrobatics, could hardly be said to be *moving* per se, in the way that a verismo style aria is. Impressive, yes. Heart-rending? Hardly.

Callas, of course, shows herself to be the master of both domains on this album, from expressing verismo pathos to exacting coloratura perfection. Both vocal styles, however, don't elicit the same reactions, or hold the same kind of cultural significance. The appeal of the verismo moment is that it creates emotional connection without specificity, assuages without apologies. The conversion in *Philadelphia*, which aims at its own kind of social truth telling about the AIDS pandemic, would be unthinkable without the truth-labor of a dramatic verismo style.

That Callas, in particular, is the singer chosen for *Philadelphia* is not arbitrary; on the contrary, once her name is evoked, like a trademark that guarantees that goods are authentic, her presence haunts the perimeter, adding celebrity status to the veristic expressivity of what is heard in the scene. Her status as a cultural touchstone for suffering adds another layer of "truthiness" that both amplifies and contextualizes the role the aria plays. And yet, as much as her legend and performance are essential, the transformative veracity that occurs in the cinematic moment is achieved only by effacing and mystifying the site of production.

To make room for Miller's conversion, Callas must take on the role of cultural saint. In turn, the recording of the aria becomes a powerful relic, an object casting an aura of transformative signification in the scene that allows Beckett and Miller to internalize Callas/Maddalena's suffering and make it their own. The truth power of the sonic event can be achieved only through Callas's secular canonization, and thus the separation of the singer, and her labor, from what she and her work come to represent.

Much of the cultural labor that women's singing voices are called upon to do relies upon a certain partitioning of the female presence, as the separation of voice and body lends both a mystique that circumvents untidy realities. This is the case for genres outside of opera as well. For instance, historian Farrah Jasmine Griffin contends that women's voices, particularly African American female singing voices, have been used to create soothing and transformative moments of verismo "truthiness" in American public life for quite some time. As Griffin explains in her essay "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," the singing voices of African American women have often been called upon to front patriotic American spectacles, from opera singers Marian Anderson and Jessye Norman to pop divas Whitney Houston and Beyoncé. Working as a "hinge" that can both resolve and provoke crisis, the black woman's voice, so Griffin, is a productive space of signification. To transform these voices into sonic emblems of specific (and sometimes disparate) ideas of American unity requires a particularly brutal schism between the singing subject and the vocal object. For as much as black women's singing voices

create a verismo space, they are, historically, some of the most unheard voices in the American political system.

The allocation of truth power to the singing woman's voice is much like the allocation of pleasure onto the same—both rely on an abstract dismemberment of the female body that allows for ideological designation. Only when symbolically detached from the whole can the voice, in particular, become a vessel for signification. When a vocal event is made manifest in a recording, the female voice and body undergo a more concrete schism, one that sets the stage for modern, technological transubstantiation. In the recorded object, the abstract power of the female voice is under the consumer's control, the sonic event ever ready for ritualized, aural ingestion.

4

Catalani, *La Wally*, Act I

Ebben? Ne andrò lontana

[Well? Then I'll go away]

Alfredo Catalani's (1854–93) bucolic drama, *La Wally*, is rarely performed live, in part due to the difficulty in staging the final scene where the soprano is swept away by an avalanche. (Ironically, this is death by voice as the disaster is triggered by her lover calling her name.) This alpine peasant romance, also featuring a libretto by Luigi Illica, premiered in Milan in 1892 and was Catalani's final opera before his premature death from tuberculosis. *La Wally* is the heroine Walburga, a stubborn mountain maiden who falls in love with her father's enemy and as a result, receives a paternal ultimatum to marry the man of his choice or leave the village. Up on a mountain pondering her fate, *La Wally* hears the echo of the church bell and decides, with this plaintive aria, to leave her home.

Like the offerings from *Adriana Lecouvreur*, this is the only Callas recording we have of this aria, and she never performed the full role. After the saturated, florid drama of the *Giordano*, this is a welcome respite, and Callas is again

restrained in her vocal delivery, almost languid. After a flurry of strings, the orchestra repeats a series of muted sonic pulses that indicate the ringing of a church bell.

As if absorbing this tone into her body, Callas spins out the first monotone line reflectively, without embellishment and with minimum vibrato (Ebben? Ne andrò lontana. [Well? Then I'll go away]). Sung in the same pensive affect, the melody then droops, as if resigned (Come va l'eco della pia campana [like the echo of the pious bell]) before blossoming on an aching restrained octave leap, a note reaching toward the mountaintop La Wally is longing for (La, fra la neve bianca [there, among the white snow]).

Callas has used this kind of voicing before in the arias from *Adriana Lecouvreur* and *Andrea Chénier*, a restrained, almost reflective tone, as if the character is only half aware of revealing private memories or considerations. She makes the interiority of these melodies palpable in the affect of the sung line with her sparing use of changes in volume or timbre, and as always, she is remarkably attentive to the motions and nuances of the orchestra. There are times when the connection between Callas and Serafin, the conductor, becomes audible, the give-and-take between orchestra and voice organic in the construction and release of musical intensity.

It is difficult to express, if one has not seen a lot of live concert or opera performances, how rare the synchronicity between singer and accompaniment is. More often than not, one has the impression that the singer is “fronting” the orchestra, unaware of everything that is going on behind them and simply singing as loud as possible at all times in

order to project over the “backing” instruments. This is not entirely the singer’s fault; after all, it’s one voice against an army of instruments, and concert halls and opera houses can sometimes have acoustics that make attentive listening between singer and orchestra challenging, if not impossible during a performance. Nevertheless, much of Callas’s artistry lies in overcoming these obstacles and establishing a dialogue with the orchestra and the conductor as each aria unfolds. This fulfills the impression not of a singer performing, but of an emotional state being enacted, unfolding before our ears in real time. Callas *listens*—such a simple task, but so few singers manage it.

We can understand how important this musical relationship is for the impact of these recordings in the moments when Callas breaks the bonds of this dialogue and allows the voice free rein. These events of emotional excess are all the more exceptional, more striking, in their brutality as the voice strains against the bonds of the orchestration and even, at times, what some opera aficionados would consider good taste. After all, moments of emotional extremity, of which the sound zero event is the most extreme example, are not, as a rule, moments of beautiful transcendence. For *La Wally*, the moments where Callas lets her voice fly are expressions of frustration and anger; on this recording, her most extreme notes are ugly, broad, and curiously thin in contrast to her other vocalization. Her loudest, highest notes hit the ear with the force of an open-handed slap.

The implicit longing of the sometimes wistful, sometimes despairing melody transformed this aria into an almost

obligatory concert staple for sopranos. We have some of the earliest recordings from Claudia Muzio in 1920 and a radiant Iva Pacetti in 1928 (both voices still remarkable for their unique beauty, despite the limitations of recording technology); Callas contemporaries Victoria de Los Angeles and Renata Tebaldi recorded versions of the aria within a year of this album.

“Ebben? Ne andrò lontana” remains a showcase piece and achieved a further glamorous gloss when it was featured in Jean-Jacques Beineix’s 1981 thriller *Diva*, based on the 1979 novel of the same name by Delacorta (pseudonym for French author Daniel Odier.) At the center of the drama are two cassettes: one a bootleg recording of the “diva” of the title, Cynthia Hawkins, played and voiced by real-life American soprano Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez, the other a confession by a prostitute named Nadia that exposes a drug and human trafficking ring run by gangsters and corrupt cops. Each tape, and thus each voice, exerts a specific kind of magnetism on the characters in the film. One of Cynthia Hawkins’s most obsessed fans longs to archive and savor the performance of the beloved idol, while a pair of ruthless recording agents are determined to get the rare bootleg for the unregulated Taiwanese market. The corrupt Parisian cops want to destroy the tape with Nadia’s confession, while a mysterious artist would like to publish its contents and bring down the criminals.

As if to illustrate the partitioning of the voices and their sources, the film is full of allocated feminine images and objects: glossy black female mannequin torsos, a floor painting of a naked woman with overlarge breasts, the diva’s

dress, black-and-white nude photographs. Women are taken to pieces here, both literally and figuratively. When news reaches Cynthia that a pirated recording of her singing is somewhere in circulation, she decries the action as a violation, a “rape.” In the final scene, when the repentant fan who made the recording plays it back to the diva, she listens with surprise. “I’ve never heard my voice before,” she comments. As the stolen aria from *La Wally* surrounds them, the fan and his idol stand as if hypnotized; while the camera retreats, we see them unite, at last, in a kiss.

There are two parties in the film who are invested in the recording of the diva’s voice, merchants and lovers; for both, the presence of the diva’s body is an unnecessary encumbrance. Parallel to this narrative are those interested in the recording of the prostitute’s voice, the uncorrupted police officers and the criminals, and for both these parties, as well, the prostitute’s body is an unnecessary encumbrance. What these men all really want is the recording: as testament, as evidence, as goods, as love object, as fetish.

Both women know that the recording signals their demise—for the prostitute, it quite literally means her death; for Cynthia, the recording is the loss of her autonomy over the listening experience, the beginning of her slow, archival petrification. (In one scene, Cynthia’s manager confronts her in frustration, exclaiming, “You’re thirty-two!”). Each of these voices takes on more presence, and more power, when disconnected from its origin.

There is a perceived incompatibility between the seductive power of the female voice and the presence of the woman’s

body. The woman's presence, paradoxically, circumscribes the pleasure to be had from the voice that represents her; it gets in the way of the listener's consumption, and interpretation, of the voice. This problem has been articulated in various myths, metaphors, and fictions where the woman is partitioned, sutured, and/or taken apart to facilitate the prerogatives of listening men.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, the hero cannot resist the allure of the ultimate, and deadly, listening experience: the song of the Sirens. Odysseus is a man in search of pleasure, whatever the cost (though notably, that cost is almost always the sacrifice of other men). The Sirens' beautiful voices are incongruous with their monstrous bodies, a patchwork of human heads, bird-like torso, and deadly talons. The voice alone holds the feminine power to lure men to their deaths on the rocks with the reiteration of epic melodies. Their island is surrounded by the skeletons and rotting corpses of men who have succumbed to their song. To indulge in this pleasure without consequences, Odysseus has himself lashed to the mast, and orders his men to stuff their ears with wax. Thus restrained, the hero allows himself to be ravished by their voices; not just divine sounds, as Italian philosopher Andrea Cavarero reminds us in *For More than One Voice* (2005), but songs that detail the vagaries of history, the poetry of epics. Thus, their voices are not only sonorous pleasure but information, and the reckoning for enjoying such joy and knowledge is, of course, death.

Odysseus manages to forego this fate, but not without cost; in order to enjoy the Sirens, Odysseus and his crew must further endure two other feminized perils before

they reach safety. Truly between a rock and a hard place, Odysseus sacrifices several of his men to the endless hunger of the female mouth monster, Scylla, perched on her ledge, to avoid the sucking and spewing vaginal water vortex of the Charybdis opposite, which opens up under a bushy ledge. The extremes of the female body, in Homer's retelling, become, quite literally, a recognizable and manageable topography that the hero and his crew can traverse for both advancement and pleasure: three feminine sites of emission—singing, eating, sucking/spewing—divided and deadly.

The advent of recording technology in the final decades of the nineteenth century offered new schemata and fantasies for the partitioning and allocation of the feminine, particularly in reaction to social and cultural changes brought about by industrialized modernity. In the West, the growing instability of seemingly fixed economic and social strata was exacerbated by the emergence of the so-called “new woman” and suffragism. As Italian cultural historian Cinzia Blum emphasizes in her analysis of Futurism and modernity, the turn of the century saw a crisis of masculinity that framed the dark side of an empowering modernity as “mediocrity, enfeeblement, powerlessness—in terms of effemination or *degenderation*” suggesting “a deep concern with shifting gender roles played a crucial role as a cause of the modern malaise” (Blum, in *Lusty*, 89). As women began challenging traditional gender roles by asserting their own economic and social autonomy, by finding and expressing their own political voices, ideological methods of oppression and control shifted as well.

Discourse around the phonograph, in particular, is revealing when it comes to anxieties about the expressive female body. On the one hand, with its potential to record and preserve voices, the phonograph is a technical equivalent of female reproduction. Take, for example, the early masthead for the German trade magazine *Phonographische Zeitschrift*, which circulated from 1900 to 1938 (Figure 1).

The *Phonographische Zeitschrift* was a unifying medium for the manufacture and trade of *musik und sprechmaschinen* [music and talking machines], covering a wide range of topics, including copyright law, technical advancements, recorded repertoire, sociological concerns,



Figure 1 Header for the German periodical *Phonographische Zeitschrift*.

and trivia. Though published in Berlin, the magazine was not limited to German concerns, but includes reports on the use of recording technology in, among others, Brazil, England, and the harem of the Shah of Persia. Opera recordings play a prominent role not only in reviews but in articles concerned with vocal fidelity and the difference between male and female voices. (Unsurprisingly, the female voice is considered “difficult.”) The diversity of the visual and textual material provides a unique topography of the reencoding of social expectations and sexual stereotypes as they coincide with the development of industrial technologies.

In the masthead image a young woman sits on a white marble bench in a garden within a Belle Époque frame. Her dress is neoclassical, in keeping with the contemporary, fictitious historicism of artists Lawrence Alma Tadema or Alphonse Mucha. One hand is cupped around her ear, while the other inscribes upon a long white strip of paper. She does not see what she writes. Instead, she stares into the distance, as if in deep concentration or a state of hypnosis. What she inscribes is discernible, but not legible—one continuous, jagged line of phonographic transcription, the “alphabetless trace” that Rilke once compared to the coronal suture of the human skull.

This figure is an updated version of the classic seventeenth-century allegory *La Dame Nature*, here shown in Thomas Salmon’s frontispiece from *An Essay To the Advancement of Musick*, published in London in 1672 (Figure 2). In the older image, a young and robust woman strums a stringed instrument, her eyes trained on the divine manuscript of notation proffered by a hand emerging from the clouds. To



Figure 2 Frontispiece for Thomas Salmon's *An Essay to the Advancement of Musick*, 1672.

realize divine harmonies on her chordophone, the eyes of *La Dame Nature* are connected to heaven, receiving communication from the divine, while the phonographic sybil of the *Phonographische Zeitschrift* appears hypnotized, her transcribing function automatic: the extended hand like

the gesture of a tone-arm, the cupped hand the receiving horn, the stylus cutting into the strip of paper. While the seventeenth-century allegorical woman is still a performing human body, fallible and dependent on the harmonies prescribed and delivered by divine grace, the twentieth-century figure is a phonographic machine, translating sound into a pattern form that only machines can write, and only machines can read. This latter figure is not only a mechanical body but also a divine one, with the magic ability to transform what she hears into machine script.

In a 1910 article from the magazine, one author is very explicit about the maternally mechanistic aspects of the phonograph. The sound is a “seed” that is implanted in the recorded disc or wax cylinder, and the resonating membrane of phonograph is the “body-giving mother,” the horn a “cradle, the nursery, in which the newborn sound wave first unfolds” (Kronfuss, *Phonographische Zeitschrift*, 10 JG, N. 3, 53). The woman-machine gives birth to the sound wave but only plays a passive role in its creation. Any alteration of the recorded sound wave from its natural original, in fact, can be understood as a maternal, feminine imperfection, as the reproducing machine can manufacture only a distorted likeness, and not a replica.

The emergence of recording technology also spawned misogynistic control fictions about divine female-machine bodies, none of them more disturbing than Auguste Villier de l’Isle Adam’s bizarre novel *L’Eve Future* [The Future Eve]. Begun in 1878 and published in 1886, l’Isle Adam tells the story of a fictionalized Thomas Edison, who constructs an android, the “future eve” of the title, in the likeness of

a fickle opera singer, Alicia Clary, to satisfy her suicidal fiancée, Lord Ewald. Ewald, obsessed with Alicia, but unable to reconcile his desire with the ordinary vacillations of the real woman, has come to Edison for a woman-machine to fulfill his desires.

The book opens with a description of Edison, the “phonograph’s papa,” as he works in his office at Menlo Park. Lord Ewald arrives at Edison’s workshop to admire and inspect his future android-consort. The inventor has created a physical specimen to match Alicia’s appearance down to the smallest detail—even her physical gestures are to be observed and recorded on a cylinder within the android’s body to maintain the illusion of the real woman. The doll is not intended for sex, however; the android is chaste, and always has a small dagger at hand with which to preserve her “virtue.” Rather, it is Alicia’s voice that forms the nexus of Lord Ewald’s desire. “[T]he resonance of Miss Alicia’s voice is so penetrating,” Ewald explains to Edison, “the notes of her singing are so vibrant and so profound, that whether she is reciting a tragic passage in noble verses or singing some magnificent aria, I am always amazed to find myself trembling with an admiration the likes of which, as you shall hear, I have never known” (de l’Isle Adam, 30).

In disturbingly precise vignettes, Edison lays the woman-machine open for Ewald’s inspection, body part by body part, to show him her many delights. The scene evokes images of sensual anatomical wax models like the eighteenth-century “Little-Venus” of Clemente Susini in the Palazzo Poggi, Bologna—recumbent women both beautiful and unconscious of their studied disembowelment. Edison’s android is a

complex amalgam of science and alchemy, vitalized by both electricity and metallic humors. The very center of her body contains his greatest achievement, two phonographs of “virgin gold” (the most “feminine” of sonorous metals) that function like player piano rolls and which are both the android’s lungs and vocal source. Edison has already captured words of “the greatest poets, the most subtle metaphysicians, the most profound novelists of this century” (de l’Isle Adam, 131), all just waiting for the voice of Alicia Clary, to be captured without her notice, to bring them to life.

The android is a kind of fantasy Frankenstein’s monster; though a semi-autonomous refinement of the human woman upon which she is modeled, one could potentially intercede with her innards and alter her feedback flow. The unique humanoid encasement, equipped with the industrial phonograph discs, symbolically rides the divide between the Romantic and modern woman-machine.

All these fantasies allocate desired aspects of the feminine whole into manageable parts that submit to external control: Homer’s feminized gauntlet, the phonographic woman-machine, Lord Ewald’s obedient singing consort. Odysseus, of course, can’t enjoy the beauty of the detached voices without fording other, fragmented feminine perils. Recording technology appears to solve this problem—one can hear the tale of the Sirens, so to speak, without the subsequent perils of Scylla and Charybdis.

A problem to solve, one could ask, for whom? The voices in these myths are desired and determined by external forces—they are voices in the ears of powerful men, voices to enjoy, consume, and possess without the untidy consequences

of the feminine whole. The Sirens, as monsters, have no status in human society (and neither do other feminized voice creatures of myth and fantasy, like mermaids, selkies, and banshees) and the opera singer Alicia Clary is only a frustrating fetish site to be harvested for parts. Even in a contemporary fiction like *Diva*, the troublesome prostitute is a stand-in for criminal activity writ large, who dies without ever uttering a word on screen, while the opera singer is a maquette (with some resemblance to Callas herself) rather than a fully developed character. Both of these women's problematic bodies are subordinate to their recordings, and they, too, are eventually "solved" —one is extinguished, while the other is embraced, and thus assuaged.

What might all these women have to say about the efficiency of recording as a means of preserving/separating their voices? The character in *Diva*, Cynthia Hawkins, comes closest to expressing her feelings—recording is rape. One need not go to such extremes, however, to understand that the body remains a troublesome site of production which haunts the fringes of the material object. As a kind of partitioning, recording is not only a means to preserve and possess a beloved voice, it is also, for many performers, a necessary cruelty, a slow extraction and preservation of the voice that creates a sonic monument to the still living body.

It is the very fixity of the medium that provides, for the consumer, a source of possession and pleasure, and for the singer, a source of disquiet. Following on Freud's familiar observation about the both troublesome and transformative effects of modern civilization, media historian John Durham Peters observes that, with the phonograph, "the

instrumentalisation of the voice and ear retroactively imposed a disability onto the human being” (Durham Peters, 191). For the performer, the fixing of the voice not only allows for a repeated listening that exposes certain heretofore overheard flaws in the voice; it also establishes an unattainable site of reproducibility, revealing the inadequacies of their own bodies as reproductive technology.

Particularly for female singers, where the power of the sung voice is so often attributed to psychoses and powers beyond their control, a recording can be perceived as a kind of saturated totality of the singers themselves. As albums are distributed and critiqued, live performances surreptitiously recorded, repeat performances compared and contrasted, the most prominent performers will find themselves competing against their recorded selves. Even while alive, a body of work may come to replace the body of the singer.

Callas gave her final performance as *Tosca* at Covent Garden in 1965 and, aside from a brief concert tour in the early 1970s to help a friend, stopped performing long before her death. The width and breadth of her brief, but prolific, performing and recording career has been lovingly compiled by one of her greatest fans, longtime Dallas Morning News music critic John Ardoin (1935–2001), in *The Callas Legacy*. Her recordings, both official and underground, continue to be pored over, remastered, rearranged, and rereleased. Less an exhumation, the curating of Callas’s body of work is an effort that began long before her death. The mapping of her performance career onto her private life forms a deceptive topography—the body of the woman reconstructed by the body of the work.

In 2017, Warner Classics teamed up with Base Entertainment to fabricate a hologram Callas to send on tour. The website promises an exciting revivification:

From the moment the curtain rises, you are enthralled in Callas' world. Her most iconic performances of Bellini, Bizet, Verdi, Puccini and more feature original recordings digitally remastered and re-created on stage through breathtaking state-of-the-art digital and laser technology. Yet this is far from a replay of her past glories. You will delight as Ms. Callas playfully engages the conductor and you will stare awe-stricken as she reacts to you, the live audience. On this fantastical evening you will experience the legendary emotional force that is Maria Callas. From one moment to the next you will feel her passionate heat, cool detachment, heartrending vulnerability, fierce confidence, and breathtaking grace. You will bear witness as she inhabits her operatic characters, and evokes the drama that inspired her sobriquet, La Divina. (<https://basehologram.com/productions/maria-callas>)

A video teaser on the Base Hologram® website shows a Callas figure in a ghostly white gown and blood-red scarf, gaudy jewelry on her neck and ears, with long, red-lacquered fingernails, flanked by a live orchestra. Her head seems a bit too big for her torso. Light reflecting from the instruments in the string section occasionally shines through her "body." A recording of Callas from 1964, singing the Card Aria from Bizet's *Carmen*, is paired with the laser image. The effort made in replicating the details of the diva's body, however, doesn't

extend to the actual practice of singing. There are moments when her mouth is not in sync with the sung material—the aperture has the wrong shape, the wrong breadth, for the sound that we are hearing.

The visual appearance of the hologram is a peculiar Callas montage; one is reminded of Edison and Lord Ewald, poring over the android meant to simulate the opera singer Alicia: How small the waist? What size the breasts? What should she wear? How old the face? But appearance is only secondary—like the fictional android, the hologram Maria has a repertoire of Callas gestures built into its presentation. It, too, relies on the singing voice to perform the sonic alchemy of resurrection, to establish the illusion of presence.

The recordings, presumably, are what tether this Callas simulacrum to its origin. But even these have undergone a transformation. In order to enhance the “reality” of the performance by using a live, local orchestra during performances, engineers have extracted Callas’s voice from some of her most famous performances, including this rendition from *La Wally*, effectively cutting the musical event in half. In excising the voice like a tumor, the performance producers fundamentally misunderstand a crucial element of Callas’s allure—it is not only her voice but her intuitive receptivity to her environment, how she uses and integrates her instrument into the more complex fabric of the musical moment that makes her an exceptional artist. Separating Callas from her ensemble transforms the voice into a collage object, one element in the construct of a creepy deep fake.

More problematically, the allocation of the voice to speakers creates a further body/voice disjunction. Critics who saw the first deployment of the hologram technology were intrigued, if not slightly disturbed, by the reconstituted presence of the diva and the voice in particular. On NPR, Tom Huinziga reported that “one overall problem is that the voice doesn’t sound like it’s coming out of a human body; it’s somehow all over the place, radiating out of loudspeakers.” More distracting, though, are “strange sounding notes [where] some pitches came off with an odd reverberation while others randomly sounded like they were produced inside a tin-can” (Ibid). Anthony Tommasini reporting in *The New York Times* was more restrained, but made similar observations on the sound, finding it “a little spotty, at times tinny.”

These imperfections, as well as a few well-placed effects, like the suspension of holographic cards in the air, don’t detract from the specific sorcery that the performance elicits. Holographic reproduction, as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) notes, is a simulacrum that promises not a reproduction of the real, but a satisfactory simulation. This reconstruction of Callas promises a vivid resurrection of the *presence* of the real diva: like some kind of contemporary *séance*, technology that will call the spirit of Callas back to life on the stage. But the hologram is less a phantom, in the classic sense, than an assemblage of phantom content—so Baudrillard, a *neofiguration*, “an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of the object in their very representation” (Baudrillard, 47).

The very totality of the hologram, paradoxically, runs counter to the effect that it would presume to evoke—this is not, and will never be, Callas. Gleaned from the traces of the real subject's partitioning, the three-dimensional performative projection becomes a prosthetic of post-capitalist nostalgia. Sealed in a hermetic caul of longing, a desire for a past that never was, the seemingly inviolate presence of the impossible object creates a closed circuit. So while both the recording and the hologram are dependent on a partitioning of the female subject, where one has the potential to be a fertile site for allocation and fantasy, the other is a space of sterile finality. The recording, as a sonic shadow of a lived event, is tethered to Callas, while the hologram casts no shadow at all. In attempting to capture the woman, it replaces her completely.

5

Boito, *Mephistophele*, Act III

L'altra notte in fondo al mare [The other night, in the depths of the ocean]

Mephistophele, which premiered at La Scala, Milan, in 1868, is the only completed opera composed by librettist Arrigo Boito (1842–1918). Boito, though a conservatory-trained musician, was best known for his work creating texts for other composers, most notably adapting Shakespeare for Giuseppe Verdi's two great final operas *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). His ability to skillfully adapt texts for the opera stage, however, is not so evident in his own opera, *Mephistophele*, which is based upon the German legend of Faust.

The story is well known: Dr. Faustus makes a bargain with the devil for youth, knowledge, and power which leads him on a series of adventures that traverse not only the world, but time itself. In addition to literary versions of the tale, which include Johann von Goethe's tragic plays, published between 1808 and 1832, and Thomas Mann's 1947 *Doktor Faustus*, the tale has been set most memorably to music by Hector

Berlioz in his symphonic poem *La damnation de Faust*, Op. 24 (1846) and Charles Gounoud's 1859 opera *Faust*.

Boito's interpretation was, initially, not a success. Unlike the librettists for Gounoud's version of the legend, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, who cut some of the episodes from the original (such as Faust's visit to Helen of Troy,) to improve the flow of the plot, Boito included many of the more fantastic, and confusing, elements of the tale in his opera. Extensive revisions over the next decade, which included cutting scenes, moving around musical numbers, and changing Faust from a baritone to a tenor, improved the opera's reception by the public. Despite these edits, even today the opera is considered unwieldy and confusing. In a recent review of a production at the Metropolitan Opera, critic Zachary Woolfe dubbed *Mephistophele* a "lavishly flawed opera—a lush, static, lengthy musical layer cake."

Callas plays the character of Margherita, a simple country girl who has the misfortune to fall in love with the rejuvenated Faust. In this aria, Margherita, imprisoned for murdering her mother and baby, is on the verge of madness. The mood is set in the opening measures by the juxtaposition of ominous, minor key brass and woodwinds with sweet, major key strings, playing dark against light, the depths of the ocean (*il fondo al mare*) against the celestial abundance of heaven. Margherita, despondent in her prison cell, meditates on her supposed crimes. "L'altra notte in fondo al mare, Il mio bimbo hanno gittato." [The other night, to the bottom of the ocean, they cast my baby.] Callas channels the dark tone of the opening brass, reciting these horrific facts as if in a trance. All of a sudden, the voice

becomes animated, almost hysterical, as it lurches up toward an ecstatic frisson on “delirare” (madness) [Or per farmi delirare/And now, to drive me mad] before returning to the previous affect. [dicon ch'io l'abbia affogato/they say that I drowned him.]

Margherita becomes aware of the prison cell around her: “L’aura é fredda, Il carcer fosco. E la mesta anima mia.” [The air is cold, the cell is dark, my poor sad soul]. Callas sings these phrases in a tone stripped of vibrato, the sound pure, even chilled. A repeated string motif accompanies her words, the slight lag in the repetition giving the impression of a finger tapping on glass, as if trying to get her attention. A slight shift in the orchestration alters the following passages without breaking the somber mood of her reflection. As if to mirror the text, a flute twitters like a small bird in the background as Margherita sings “Come il passero del bosco” [like a bird in the wood], “Vola vola vola via!” [Fly fly fly away!] and the voice takes flight, tentatively at first, but gaining in strength until it morphs into a veristic, sound zero cry and a forceful plea: “Ah! Pieta di me!” [Oh, have pity on me!].

The second part of the aria mirrors the first, as Margherita confronts her other crime—accidentally poisoning her mother so that she could join her lover for a clandestine tryst. This portion of the aria mirrors, melodically, the previous section, but Callas imbues the repetition with such a particular hypnotic intensity that it seems an evolution, rather than a reiteration, of the previous material. When she at last releases the climactic moment of vocal extremity, the moment is so intense that the abrupt end of the aria is like a vacuum. The absence of the voice is palpable.

In his brief analysis of this album in *The Callas Legacy*, Callas confidante and biographer John Ardoin calls the interpretation of this aria the “deepest statement” of the collection, noting that the phrase “Laura et fredda” is “literally chilled and of wrenching expression” (Ardoin, 86).

The delivery of this aria is so seamless that words seem inadequate to describe what Callas is doing here. Her voice fluctuates from cold, to hot, to scalding, from sweet to ugly to extreme. Callas’s singing has been maligned and praised in the broadest of terms: brutal, ugly, angelic, cold, frigid, metallic, muffled, cloaked, sharp. It is all these things, and yet none of them. Such a quixotic, changeable instrument. Just when one thinks one might have a succinct way to describe it, it eludes characterization.

In his oft-cited 1972 text *The Grain of the Voice*, French semiologist Roland Barthes wants to avoid adjectives when contemplating vocal difference. His motives are understandable—adjectives seem too weary, too shopworn, to sufficiently describe the totality of vocal expression. Barthes proposes a novel concept, the “grain” of the voice, as a means to determine the nuances of otherwise subjective affinities. The term is so suggestive that it arises in discourses about the voice as if its meaning were self-explanatory, which it certainly is not. The grain is a concept saturated with significance that, nonetheless, eludes specification. The root of Barthes’s mission is desire: he is attempting to distinguish the singing voice of his former teacher, Swiss baritone Charles Panzéra, from that of established German author and singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. The grain is the site of difference

between these two voices, for what Barthes gains from one, he finds lacking in the other.

The lengths that Barthes goes to try to define the grain should give some indication of the precariousness of the term. It could also give evidence, as musicologist Jonathan Dunsby suggests, that Barthes was not even really searching for a way to evaluate the aesthetic qualities of different artifacts, but, like Proust, was in search of lost time, “to recapture the acute reality of artistic experience—in his case, to inscribe that experience on the written page” (Dunsby, 129).

This futile endeavor, only suggested by *The Grain of the Voice*, achieves a certain poignancy in *Music, Voice, Language* (1977). “I myself have a lover’s relation to Panzéra’s voice,” Barthes confesses, “not to his raw physical voice, but to his voice as it passes over language, over our French language, like a desire: no voice is raw, every voice is steeped in what it says. I love his voice, I have loved it all my life” (Barthes, 280). In *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), Barthes explains, “Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the lover’s absence” (15). His connection to Panzéra is not one of Romantic love, but something that takes its guise, if only for a short time. It is obsession, and self-consciously, unabashedly erotic.

* * *

I have been reluctant, up to this point, to write about the voice and its erotic potential. So many texts readily, even eagerly, make the connection between sex and the female voice, the orgasm and the scream, the partitioning of the female body and sexual fetishization. At points, I have been exhausted by the dominance of the male gaze and its narrative of longing,

of submissive listeners and their ravished ears, waiting for the jab and thrust of the feminized voice between the splayed legs of their ears. I wonder if the willingness to so quickly equate the female voice with the erotic is as much diagnosis as affirmation, a fulfilling prophecy that distinguishes but doesn't extinguish pleasure.

And yet, I can find no other way to define my encounter with this specific version of "L'altra notte in fondo al mare" than that of eroticism. To my ear, this recording has an integrity that is difficult to breach. Every time I try to listen with a critical distance—that is, to put a metaphorical arm's length between what I am hearing and what I am feeling—I fail. In my ear, the recording is inviolable. It pulls me in completely, and I have the feeling, against my own logic, of being overpowered, of submitting myself to the erotic gravity of its rises and falls, throbs and grinds. It pulls me in like a vortex—my own personal sonic Charybdis.

I would love to say that my obsession with this recording has something to do with Callas in particular—her elusive genius, her technical mastery—but the power that this recording holds for me is beyond the sum of its parts. I have too often been obsessed by sound objects with middling vocalists to think that my relationship with this song has anything to do with Callas in particular. The first time I had this feeling, when I was 11 years old, was with "Straight Up" from Paula Abdul's debut album *Forever Your Girl* (Virgin, 1988). Listening pleasure of this kind is not dictated by the dictums of quality or perceived "good taste." On the contrary, sound objects that exert this kind of force need not be aesthetically noteworthy or even particularly good.

More often than not, they seem to choose us rather than we choosing them. I recall being so completely in thrall to this Paula Abdul track that I wore out the cassette tape by rewinding and replaying it so often that it acquired a distinct, seasick lag in the outro of the preceding track.

It is not a coincidence that I first fell under the spell of a sound object when on the cusp of adolescence. What I felt about that track would be mirrored in my first crush a few years later—the same feeling of helplessness and pleasure, of fixation and dissatisfaction. Like the sound objects, the people I've had crushes on have been neither particularly noteworthy nor good, and the feeling seemed to happen by chance. Unlike the sound objects, my crushes on people certainly had something to do with physical attraction and an inexplicable web cast by pheromones.

Perhaps this is what makes the connection to a particular track seem more purely erotic, more complete, than a crush on a person. It is pure, sonic auto-affection; I have complete power over my own private discourse with the sound object. The song, on repeat, provokes a physical reaction—not genital, but somewhere in the region of my solar plexus, as if connecting to my breath. I willingly submit and let the track work through me, always with anticipation and a sense of awe at how fresh it feels with every listen—familiar and new all at the same time. I worry that every time might be the last.

Over the years, I have been under the spell of tracks regardless of their genre, age, gender, or instrument. There are two constants to this experience: the connection to the sound object is sudden, overwhelming and absolute, and

that sometime in the future, the song will release me as inexplicably as it pulled me in.

In the throes of my obsession, there is always the moment where I want to try to conserve this feeling so that I can retain it, archive it, revisit it because I know that it is going to end. Someday, I'll press play and the feeling will be gone. Like Barthes, I want to inscribe and diagnose the inexplicable chemistry between myself and the object as a testament to the overwhelming desire it evokes for submission and sublation.

Unlike Barthes, I have little desire to dissect or define my affinity for this song, either to weigh its virtues against another singer (Callas rival Renata Tebaldi, for example, also well known for singing this aria), or to create systematic parameters to that effect. I do wonder, though, if my fidelity has something to do with recorded fidelity. How much of my obsession is conditioned by the fixity of the sound object? Repetition fuels the erotic connection, but also foreshadows its demise. "*Song means nothing*," Barthes writes. "It is in this that you will understand at last what it is that I give to you; as useless as a wisp of yarn, the pebble held out to his mother by the child" (*The Lover's Discourse*, 77)—meaningless objects, yet imbued with meaning.

If I were to redefine the grain, "the body in the singing voice" (Barthes, 276), it would be thus: I reject the notion, outright, that the "body" Barthes identifies here has anything to do with the body of the singer as producing, working body. Much of this book so far has been an endeavor to identify the body, and women's singing bodies in particular, as a site for technical labor. It is essential, therefore, to separate

the singing body as a site of technical production from the body, as in *corps*—an attribution which one might use to describe the qualities of a particular wine, and which is the interpretation, or projection, of the consumer/listener.

Barthes conflates the two: his desire for Panzera, the man, and his feeling for his voice, manifest in the object of the recording. As I have stated earlier, my attachment to this particular recording of this aria has nothing to do with Callas, as a physical person or as a site of fantasy or desire, but with some other, inexplicable obsession, which is entirely subjective and, I believe, has *little to do with the object qualities of the recording itself*.

So if the body of the music is more like the body (*corps*) in fine wine, inherently subjective and dependent on the listening ear, the act of listening/ingesting is where the *grain* is defined, via experience, as the body. The burden of grain is completely shifted from the performer, and the sound object, and onto the ear. Just as a shot bullet retains the traces of a weapon's barrel, the heard material receives the grain incised by the ear as it enters the body. The ear, to be more explicit, is scarred—it has bumps, notches, and ridges all formed by acculturation. All of heard and learned experience thus tracks grooves onto what is heard, simultaneously referencing, dissecting, feeling during the listening act. Some of this is deliberate (as listening is not simply hearing), while some is subconscious. Grain, in this context, is the marking and interpreting of sound objects—it is constant, subjective, and inculturated.

If we conceive of a sound object—a recording, in this case—as a projectile that enters the ear, each one is incised

with our subjective grain, is read by our ear canal, and yet some sound objects provide more resistance than others. Their shape and form slow the ingraining process, or even alter it altogether. (Who has not had the experience of feeling forever changed after experiencing a certain sound event?) It is only through this resistance to normal inscription that we become aware of grain at all. This is where the obsession starts—the object rubs and bothers, it gets, quite literally, stuck in the head. In resisting the inscription process, one becomes *aware* of the act of ingraining itself. Repeat listening, as much as it is a source of undefinable, frictional pleasure, is also an attempt to resolve the failure to process, to categorize, to allocate. The sound object itself bears no responsibility for its status as point of obsessive, erotic fixation.

This is a disruptive feeling, as much as it is humbling. It is also painfully, inexplicably, erotic. All of the tools at my disposal in approaching other musical works are of no use here, and I willingly abdicate them, if only to acknowledge that listening is not always a self-determined act, but is, at rare moments, an encounter that evades specification or diagnosis. Any attempt to analyze my experience would not only be disappointing but disingenuous. I am satisfied with my obsession, for as long as it lasts.

6

Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act I

Una voce poco fa [A voice just now]

Gioachino Rossini's (1792–1868) most performed opera, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) got off to an ignominious start. The premiere of the opera in Rome was a disaster. Fans of rival veteran composer Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816), who had written a popular opera thirty years before based on the same text, hissed, booed, and rained abuse on the performers. The singer playing Don Basilio tripped over a trapdoor while coming on stage, landed on his face, and had to contend with a bloody, broken nose. A stray cat wandered out on the stage and had to be caught and ejected—twice. Rossini himself remained stoic at the keyboard as fistfights broke out in the audience during the second act.

The French author Stendhal (pseudonym for Marie-Henri Beyle), who witnessed the premiere of the opera, described Rosina's introductory aria ["cavatina"] as "the pretentious cries of a woman advanced in years in place of the sweet lamenting of a young girl in love." The contralto who first sang the role, Geltrude Righetti-Giorgi, took offense at Stendhal's condemnation, rebutting, "I was

not advanced in years. I had scarcely reached the age of twenty-three.” Indeed, if his critique was of the performer then Righetti-Giorgi’s response is not unreasonable, but if his displeasure was with Rossini’s writing for Rosina, his critique may have been justified—it is hardly the aria of a young, unsophisticated girl.

Il Barbiere di Siviglia is based upon the first of a trilogy of plays written by French polymath Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732–99). The second serves as the story for Mozart’s opera *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), while the third was finally set to music in 1966 by Darius Milhaud in his opera *La mere coupable*. In *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Don Bartolo, an elderly Spanish doctor, wishes to marry his young and wealthy ward, Rosina, when she comes of age. The dashing Count Almaviva, who wants to make Rosina love him for himself and not his title or money, has disguised himself as a poor student (Lindor) and with the aid of his servant, Figaro, sets out to woo the young woman.

The aria marks a turning point on the album, away from the verismo, lyric style to coloratura virtuosity. Callas is in superb voice on this track—after charting the emotional extremes of so many tragic heroines on the album thus far, the change in style and pace is welcome, not jarring. The stylistic contrast between verismo and coloratura arias could make a concert program uneven, but remarkably, Callas manages to weave the expressiveness of her lyric vocalization into the complex latticework of the elaborate coloratura without disturbing the precision of the vocal line. Unexpected flashes of vocal color, like small buds, blossom amid the florid ornamentation.

A minute into the aria, on “Lindor”—a delicate descending ornamentation as if she savors the name of her young suitor, rolling it around in her mouth, and off her tongue.

As the cantabile develops, the contrast between the youthful sprightliness, elasticity, and bell-like clarity of ascending motifs and the almost carnal enjoyment as they dip, only for a moment, into the sensuous, mature warmth of Callas’s lower tones: 3’30”, a slight upward scoop on “docile” [sweet], followed by a provocative slide up and retreat from the rich vowels in the word “amarosa” [loving].

This interpretation of Rosina is aroused but shy, a tease full of bravado and a girl overwhelmed by new feelings. Callas negotiates between coloratura precision and lyric indulgence, allowing neither to overwhelm the other, creating tension in what could be a tedious display of vocal acrobatics.

This reciprocity between the verismo and coloratura aspects of Callas’s vocal production is particularly fitting, as “Una voce poco fa” is a play in contrasts, between the opening cantabile and the cabaletta that follows, between the docile Rosina and the earthy, wily Rosina. One has the sensation that Callas revels in the challenge that the aria presents, both vocally and dramatically. There is no better suture between the lyric and coloratura portions of the album than this performance. Rather than obscuring the expression of character, Callas crafts the coloratura ornamentation into a complex externalization of Rosina’s quixotic nature.

In the aria, Rosina coquettishly speaks of a “voice that has spoken in my heart” [Una voce poco fa, Qui nel cor mi risuonò]. When one speaks of an “inner voice” it usually refers to some intimate, psychological phenomenon, like

Socrates's personal "daemon" or the angels that Robert Schumann heard before he composed. Quite often, this inner voice scolds, taking the form of a voice of conscience or of reason, not of love. The fact that the inner voice is perceived as a voice at all is perplexing, considering that it lacks actual sound waves. The perceived "vocality" has more to do with vocal metaphysics—the explicit process of being told what to do—rather than with any actual vocal phenomenon. The "hearing" of the "inner voice" allows a momentary disavowal of autonomy, and of responsibility.

But the actual voice, the instrument in the body, has a very specific interiority and sonic presence, one that not only gives the voice a certain kind of metaphysical authority but also one that presents one of the primary obstacles of vocal pedagogy. Without the ability to actually touch or shape the instrument, a teacher must rely on metaphor and trial by error to see what works with each student.

For such an evocative force, the actual instrument is rather diminutive. The thyroid cartilage, which houses the vocal folds (or cords, as they are sometimes called) is about the size of a walnut shell (Figure 3). If one places a few fingers lightly on the front of the throat, one can feel it rise and fall while swallowing. The thyroid, or "Adam's apple," is suspended by a series of muscle fibers from the hyoid bone at the top of the throat. (In forensic science, a broken hyoid bone is a tell-tale sign of strangulation.) Within the cartilaginous ring of the thyroid lie the vocal folds, layers of tissue that vary in length and thickness depending on age and biological sex. In adult men, the length of the vocal folds are usually between .75 and 1 inch (between a nickel and a quarter), while adult women

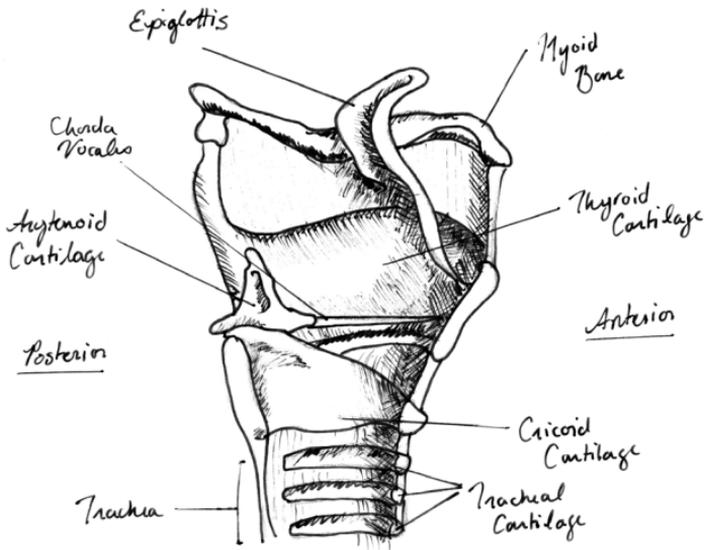


Figure 3 Side view of the vocal process.

have a length of approximately .5 to .75 inches (between a dime and nickel). Hormones and age alter the thickness and pliability of the vocal tissues, much as they alter other parts of the body.

To create sound, a pair of small, horn-like cartilages called the arytenoids, which are attached to the posterior of the vocal folds (Figure 4), work to adduct and abduct (bring together and separate) the vocal folds, as well as lengthen them to change the frequency of the sound produced. The folds are not struck or plucked like a guitar or piano string;

LYRIC AND COLORATURA ARIAS

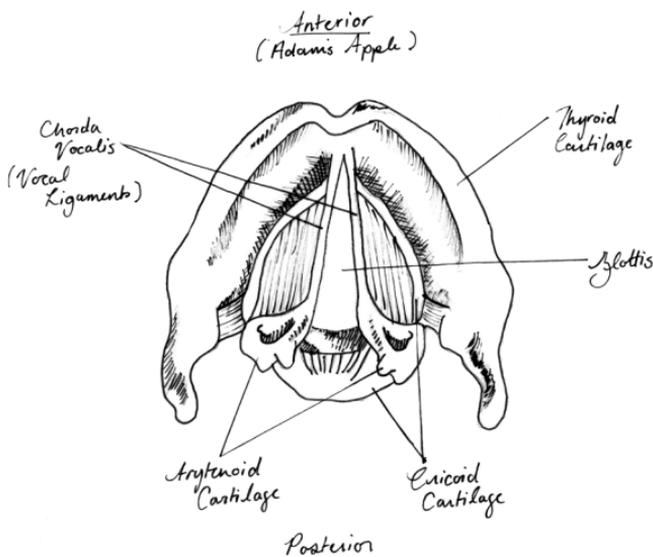


Figure 4 Overhead view of the vocal process.

rather, it is air pressure from below the vocal folds, coming from the lungs and rising through the trachea, that causes the vocal folds to vibrate rapidly. The vibrations occur between 100 cycles per second (for low pitches) up to 300 cycles per second (for high frequencies). To detect these vibrations in your own throat, simply place your fingers on the thyroid cartilage and hum a low tone. The vibration felt in the fingertips is caused by the rapid oscillation of the vocal folds within the larynx.

Vibration alone is not enough to produce a sung tone. After the production of sound is actuated by the breath, the frequency produced by the flow of air through the vocal folds

is be shaped and modulated by the resonating cavity of the pharynx (nose, upper throat, and mouth), and articulated by the lips, teeth, and tongue.

All these principles of vocal production—actuation, vibration, resonance, and articulation—are present in spoken as well as sung speech. For most people, these principles function so instinctively that one is hardly aware of each part of the process. Thus, the first step in any vocal training, whether it be speech therapy or singing, is to cultivate an awareness of each part of vocal production. For classical practice, it starts with a number of exercises to heighten awareness of the breath, sometimes referred to as vocal “support.” This can be as simple as lying on the floor, laying a hand on the upper abdomen, and breathing in and out to get in touch with the rise and fall of the body with the breath.

More advanced exercises demand a sustained hiss, or sharp bursts of breath through clenched teeth, imitating the chugging of a steam engine; the former is designed to focus the pupil on sustaining the breath, the latter is to bring attention to the explosive power of forced exhalation. A teacher will often experiment with breathing placement—that is, where a student “feels” the breath most effectively. Most often this starts with the sensation of the breath in the belly, with the expansion below the rib cage on the intake of breath, but the breath can also be felt (and isolated) in the spreading of the side ribs through the action of the intercostal muscles, and in the spreading of the trapezius muscle between the shoulder blades. It is paramount that any classical singer not only be aware of but also be in control of their breath

production. Without a steady and well-modulated flow of air, the specificity of vibration demanded by classical repertoire would be almost impossible to achieve.

Vibration itself, however, is not seamless. Most tunes for untrained voices remain within an octave range, while a classical singer needs to have a comfortable range of at least 2 and a half, if not 3 octaves. For most singers, vocal training involves years of learning how to suture together the different “ranges” apparent in a single voice.

When young singers begin training, the disjunction, or disconnection, in different parts of the voice becomes apparent. For women, the most distinct break usually occurs between a deep, “chest” register, and the movement to “head” voice. For men, this break is between modal and falsetto ranges. Since falsetto is rarely in demand on the opera stage, it is usually female singers that have to work at smoothing out vocal discontinuities. These gaps can feel like “changing gears” in the throat, a slight pulling or jumping sensation of the thyroid cartilage—to the ear, it sounds like a break or a leap. Classical training tries to eliminate this disjuncture; however, there are plenty of singing traditions that exploit this leap in the larynx, such as Alpine yodeling, the Sami Yoiks, Kulning herding yelps in Sweden, or the calls of the Aka nomadic pygmies of Central Africa.

Since the vocal process is concealed, smoothing out this vocal break demands acute self-awareness of the body and critical internal listening. Most people are uncomfortable with hearing their own recorded voices, as the inner perception of their vocality is different from what others hear. The same holds true, and is even more extreme, for

singers; the voice they hear when singing is not the voice that is perceived by the external listener. The singer's body, with all its saturated tissues, is simply too close to its own sound.

Other than these abrupt breaks in vocal production, the aim in classical pedagogy is to create a smooth, unified vocal timbre that can move seamlessly between notes, across octaves, and from vowel to vowel. The cultivation of resonance becomes essential. Since, traditionally, opera singers are not miked or mixed, the body is the sole instrument of amplification and modification; different vibrational frequencies and vowel shapes demand alterations in resonance space to create vocal continuity. Classically trained singers are constantly aware of what is called vocal "placement"—the alteration of the resonating cavity (including the back of the tongue, the soft palate, and the nose) to adjust specific sounds while maintaining vocal continuity. A professional singer can precisely manipulate this resonating space for effect: a "retreat" of the sound, a *diminuendo*, a "flattening" of the tone, or nasal coloring.

Since access to the body is limited, the sense memory of "placement" often relies on metaphors. A singer might envision shooting an arrow out of their forehead, spinning a thread from between their lips, or imagine a flower blooming at the back of the throat. These images allow for vocal control—the metaphor compensates for the lack of actual hands-on manipulation of the instrument.

One of the most consistent images in vocal training is that of the "passaggio" or passage, a precarious "narrowing" of sensation in the female voice as it moves higher in frequency. The passageway usually lies between 3 or 4 whole tones and

feels like a very narrow traverse. One has to be cautious and aware of vocal placement on these few notes, as a false step can cause the voice to not only sound tight, but break. After crossing this passage, however, the voice feels unaccountably liberated.

Those notes that sound most extreme to the listener—the high, sustained frequencies that operatic sopranos are famous for—actually feel effortless for most female singers. Many describe a feeling of weightlessness, of stretching, when articulating these tones, as if the voice is no longer their own but detached, flung out into space. Some have even said that their perception of the pitch completely disappears; that the frequency is experienced as a kind of rasp or whisper from within the singing body. This particular lightness of singing is at least in part due to the blending of the whistle register, the highest of all registers in the female voice, into the head voice. Pop singers like Minnie Ripperton and Mariah Carey make judicious use of the airy, delicate timbre of the whistle register to define their vocal style. Paradoxically, the palpable force that creates the embracing extimacy of the sound zero event is often lost on the singers themselves—too close to the source of production, the extreme note dissolves into white noise.

There is no universal pedagogy for opera singing, but there is a central repertoire that defines it, which is in turn determined by the cultural market. Verismo style demanded a new kind of singing that conjured emotional affect through technical, vocal effects, and pedagogy followed suit.

As this brief excursion into vocal physiology and production emphasizes, operatic vocal production is complex, and not only physically demanding but definitive for the genre. Despite the distinct physical restrictions of this type of singing, however, the idea that verismo-style singing is somehow aligned with realistic “acting” is difficult to decouple. Part of the problem, as the cultural critic K. Ludwig Pfeiffer explains, are the expectations the term *performance* evokes, “especially in the conventional theatrical context, [the term performance] calls up considerably more gestural, interactive and social dimensions than should be called for in singing” (in Kolesch and Krämer, 73). At the crux of this dilemma, the conflation of spoken acting and singing, is the voice itself. Too often, the voice is discussed as if it were an expressive totality, obscuring the distinctions between speech and song. However, the sonorous aspects of the *spoken* voice are not equivalent to the sonorous aspects of the *singing* voice—both comply and are determined by different aesthetic, functional, and social demands. While both are certainly communicative expressions, in that they convey something to the listener, they don’t achieve distinction by comparison. That is, singing is not “bad speech” any more than speech is “bad singing.”

Thus the verismo turn in vocal production should not be understood in the context of spoken acting, despite its relationship with the goals of veristic movements in theater and literature at the end of the nineteenth century. Verismo style is not simply a sung version of the expression in spoken declamation; rather, it is a complex recoding of sung affect within the context of singing traditions and conventions.

The opera singing voice, as a vocal method dependent on the gradations and limits of virtuosic intensity, embodies meaning without the expectation that speech has toward conventional signification.

This has ramifications not only on how these voices should be interpreted, but on their relationship to the site of production. Both the performing speaking voice, as with acting, and the performing singing voice, as with opera, have unique relationships to the body; spoken acting depends on a certain relationship with other bodily and facial gestures, while successful singing has no such obligation. While the production of the singing voice may be physically *determined* by the body, the voice's expressive power is not contingent upon its relationship to physical movement, facial expressions, or even lexical clarity.

In recent years, HD technology and the trend toward opera in cinemas has exacerbated the demands put on singers and singing bodies. To simply stand and sing, derogatorily called “park and bark,” is at odds with the presentation expectations of this distribution medium. More and more, singers are required to “act” their roles for the benefit of close shots. There is nothing at all realistic, however, in the sense of contemporary acting, of a soprano and tenor locked into a duet subjected to a close-up. With their mouths, lips, and jaws conscripted for the production of sound, there is little left of the face to emote for the camera.

Does this heighten our awareness of the passion of these two characters? Hardly. At best, it is mildly embarrassing to see singers that close while performing, dental work

exposed, makeup caking in the lines around their mouths and eyes, eyebrows wiggling suggestively. At worst, it is counterproductive to what a desire for operatic “acting” would want to achieve; prioritizing the eye above the ear, it distracts from the primary element of opera itself—the affect of the sung voice.

Perhaps our highly visual culture finds it difficult to subordinate the precision of the gaze to the diffusion of the listening ear, thus all the efforts to make singers into “actors,” the focus on the weight and age, particularly of female performers, and the close-ups of singers while operating their internal machinery. This is not to say that opera is not visual but the visual is a complement to the sonic. This is an embrace, not a hierarchy.

Opera is a panoramic phenomenon. A wide-angle approach blurs the lines of the bodies, narratives, sets—of the theatrical apparatus itself—to create space for the essential immaterial component of music. The associative dilation that listening provokes stymies the awkward realness of tight focus. Alone, these elements can be ridiculous: the fantabulous misogynistic plots that Catherine Clément decries, the sweating, straining bodies stripped of dignity. In collaboration, they exceed their deficits.

Despite my skepticism about the demand for physical “acting” on the opera stage, the expressive techniques that are part of operatic singing, and which form the crux of the communicative power of opera, are not simply emotive by default. The freedom that verismo style offered to vocal expression in the nineteenth century, away from the clean

technical virtuosic displays of coloratura, has become convention. As a result, the fixity of these mannerisms have undergone what cultural critic and composer Theodor Adorno calls “a kind of reification, a technification of the inward” (Adorno, 215). Pedagogy certainly plays a part in the encoding and petrifying of certain vocal gestures and ornaments—many of the vocal effects that Callas makes on this album, for example, have become standard for younger singers to imitate while learning these arias. In particular, since the lion’s share of opera performances globally is limited to a certain repertoire, training often becomes not only a mastery of musical material but also a study of previous performances. Vocal gestures from particularly memorable, veristic performances become integrated, through imitation, as ex-notational markers calculated to provoke instant empathy. In a form of instructionally encouraged karaoke, young singers imitate recordings either until the gestures become innate, or they develop interpretations of their own.

The encoding of certain vocal gestures is not limited to opera—as Greil Marcus has critiqued in “Soul Music and its Double,” melismatic vocal gestures in gospel were once “a way for the gospel singer to tell you she has been taken out of herself, that she is close to God, that her voice is no longer really her own” (Marcus, 2016). As these gestures became convention, however, they underwent a shift in cultural significance. Instead of exemplifying emotional excess and a loss of control, they come to represent vocal mastery.

Both verismo vocal gestures and the gospel melisma owe this transformation to the denuding forces of the cultural market—as desirable commodities, there is considerable

investment in their evocative power. And yet, paradoxically, as soon as the gesture becomes commonplace, it loses much of its original force. As simulations of excess, they only gesture at its lack.

There is less freedom in the manifestation of the operatic voice than there is in gospel, pop, or rock. Operatic technique, after all, is designed to eradicate many of the vocal qualities that these other genres prize, to smooth the difference between vocal registers, to knead and stroke the voice into a pliable whole that conforms to desired norms. Much of what Callas does on *Lyric and Coloratura Arias*, in fact, can be distilled down to technical specifics—the intuitive placement of an interruption of breath, a well-placed portamento, a sudden diminuendo when an ecstatic high note seems just about to veer out of control. Good technique is in itself a remarkable achievement, and many artists have had successful careers from simply filling in the blanks and connecting the dots.

And yet, technique, in any genre, can only go so far. In the constant struggle against the petrification and commodification of gestures, the artist's truest struggle is the perception and occupation of the moment. This is a constant, real time reckoning with histories and conventions, the surrendering, as Greil Marcus stresses, of a certain expressive autonomy. It is renouncing, in the most self-reflective of behaviors—performing with your own body—the ease of solipsistic superficiality in favor of vulnerability.

This is something that is almost impossible to quantify, but easy to hear. It is the sensation that we, the listeners, are in the moment. What a miraculous science fiction! It is truly a wonder that reproductive technology has not corrupted

this sensation, but that the act of listening, even to long-dead artists, in far-away places, pulls us into that imaginary space of made music, and that we are there.

For this sensation to happen, though, artists need to leave space for the listening ear. I hear Callas and I hear her masterful technique, her chimeric timbre, the liquid pulse of the vibrato—more than that, I hear her listening—to history, to the conductor, to the music, to herself. In addition to her numerous gifts, this was perhaps the greatest. The deception is so convincing that sometimes, when listening to Callas, I can almost hear her listening back.

7

Meyerbeer, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel, ou Dinorah*, Act II

Ombra leggera [The Shadow Song]

The once famous, now rather forgotten, composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864) might be said to have had a career that peaked and fell with the sun. When the sophisticated innovation of the electric arc light broke through the fog at the end of Act III of one of his last operas, *Le prophète* (1849), contemporary critics hailed the event as a theatrical miracle, a triumph of “made-life” reflective of the age. It was also the specific stage technique Richard Wagner, an erstwhile protégée of the composer, would so famously polemicize against in his 1851 *Opera and Drama* as “Wirkung ohne Ursache,” or as an “effect without cause” (Wagner, 95–8).

Over his prolific career, Meyerbeer, born in Germany as Jakob Liebmann Meyer Beer into a wealthy Jewish family, cultivated a Grand, multicultural opera style that reflected his own cosmopolitan acculturation. Early on in his career, Meyerbeer moved to Italy, changed Jakob to Giacomo, sutured his two last names, and began his career as a composer, modeling his first five operas on the work of Gioachino

Rossini. By the time he moved to Paris, Meyerbeer was already defining his own style and making his mark in the opera world; the success of *Robert le diable*, which premiered in 1831, cemented his celebrity status. His music synthesized Germanic orchestral traditions with the traits of Italian bel canto; he wrote for the best singers of the day, including Cornélie Falcon and Jenny Lind. A consummate showman, Meyerbeer became famous for staged works which were lavish and spectacular, with grand scenes involving crowds of singers and stage effects that awed the audience.

The sunrise in *Le prophète* was only one of many spectacular moments in Meyerbeer's operas. Wagner's condemnation of his erstwhile mentor was, of course, a bit hypocritical; Wagner was not himself above using effect to invoke sensation. As opera scholar Tom Kaufman notes, "it should also be remembered that it [Meyerbeer's sunrise] is no different from what Wagner was to do as late as the *Ring*" (Kaufman, 646). And yet Wagner's critique reflects the beginning of a shift in the public reception of Meyerbeer's work. While during his lifetime, Meyerbeer enjoyed near celebrity status, his fame is thrown into stark, almost poignant, relief by his near obscurity in the twentieth century.

Meyerbeer's technical prowess was not only manifested in staging—his vocal writing is often deceptively simple, while offering singers material to display technical expertise as well as artistry. The few musical fragments that remain in contemporary circulation as concert showpieces attest to his mastery of vocal nuance. The lush vocal line of "Pays merveilleux . . . O, paradis," from the fourth act of *L'Africaine* (1865), gives tenors a moment to luxuriate in sustained

high notes while the woodwinds imitate agitated birds in the background. “Ah! mon fils, sois béni,” one of Fidès’ arias in *Le prophète*, a rôle Meyerbeer wrote for Pauline Viardot, provides not only vivid emotional contrast in the shifting tone color but also passages in an extremely low range that highlight the satisfyingly deep, rich tone of some mezzo sopranos.

“Ombre légère” [ital. Ombra leggera], the so-called Shadow Song from *Le Pardon de Ploërmel, ou Dinorah* (1859) is one of Meyerbeer’s most resilient showpieces. As a late French manifestation of the stereotypical Italian primo ottocento “mad aria,” it has found a place on the concert stage as a vehicle for deft vocal acrobatics, particularly in the production of the famous “shadow” vocal effect. In particular, the aria integrates the visual *pas de deux* motif of woman and shadow, a popular nineteenth-century ballet trope, with the familiar mad scene aria via a clever juxtaposition of visual double with a vocal double, a device that, to my knowledge, is unique in the opera canon.

While the aria is exceptional, the plot of the opera from which it is lifted seems silly, if not outright banal. Dinorah, the heroine, is a shepherdess who has been abandoned by her treasure-obsessed fiancé, Hoel, on their wedding day. As a result of her abandonment, she has gone mad, and in Act II, we find her wandering the woods at night with her beloved pet goat.

As the moonlight percolates through the trees, it casts her shadow on the ground. Enchanted by this apparition, Dinorah requests that the shadow dance and sing with her. To coax a response from the figment, she sings small melodies

and demands her shadow sing them back. The conceit of the aria, and what makes it such spectacular concert repertoire, is the virtuosic exchange that the singer must create between Dinorah and her shadow voice, all articulated by the same singing body.

Le Pardon de Ploërmel premiered in 1859 at the Opéra Comique in Paris, with a libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier. After that performance, Meyerbeer noted in his diary that the Emperor and Empress invited him into their box after the second act to express their pleasure and approbation: “It was,” he wrote, “(Almighty God be thanked!) a brilliant success” (Meyerbeer, 121).

It was the last work that Meyerbeer would see reach the stage. Riding on the success of his previous comic opera, *L'Étoile du Nord* (1854), *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* flourished at the box office and was quickly translated into German and Italian versions soon after its premiere; the opera remained popular, particularly in Paris, until WWI, when it fell out of fashion.

The vocal range and stamina demanded by the aria are formidable; performance requires fleet and flexible vocal technique, attention to shifting tempi, and remarkable sustain. Though usually described as a waltz, the lilting, at times almost tripping, $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm is more evocative of a lively mazurka. The aria calls for an impressive vocal range of over two octaves. As a concert showpiece, the shadow vocalization affords sopranos a unique moment to perform vocalized derangement while also displaying vocal agility and skill.

There are many indications, both sonic and gestural, that a singer can make to define Dinorah's disturbed mental state, and these vary in subtlety and complexity. To signify madness, some singers simply use exaggerated physical gestures (like soprano Summie Joh, who literally looks back and forth while performing, signaling some kind of double), or add vocal effects like staccati or portandi not indicated in the score. There are singers who merely perform the shadow portion diminished in volume. And while these affectations are superficial displays of "otherness," a kind of theatrical gloss, a more distinct and complex manifestation of Dinorah's madness is created by sophisticated, and subtle, deployment of vocal technique.

The aria begins rather conventionally with a lilting dance melody that Dinorah sings, coaxing her shadow to stay: "Ombra leggiara, non te n'andar, non t'involar, no, no, no" [Light shadow, don't go away, don't fly away! No! No! No!]. Callas's tone is light here, barely touching each note as she articulates the text. The "no" is coquettish. "Fata o chimera, sei lusinghiera, non t'involar, no, no no" [Fairy or Chimera, flatter me, do not flee! No! No! No!]. Dinorah continues to plead with her shadow as this brief section comes to a conclusion with a few capricious, playful vocal ornamentations.

A sudden *forte* strike from the orchestra is the first indication that something is about to change. Initially relaxed, almost tranquil, the aria becomes progressively more agitated; after the initial cohesion between orchestra and vocal line, the two begin to divide.

Dinorah sings: "Ad ogni aurora ti vo' trovar" [Every morning I want to find you].

Another strike from the orchestra, and Dinorah asks the shadow to join her: “ah, resta ancora, vieni a danzar” [Oh, stay here, come and dance].

As if to coax her shadow with sound, the phrases start to become elongated—Callas spins out each final vowel like a delicate thread of sound, releasing the tone only to begin another as Dinorah continues to negotiate with her non-responsive shadow. The dance tempo begins to lose cohesion as the vocal melody slows to follow the spoken rhythms of Dinorah’s demands: “Rispondi a me, cantar con me!” [Answer me, sing with me!].

Words, it appears, are not sufficient to coax the shadow to life, and the encounter is forced to move beyond language. After a brief pause, Callas sings a brisk, virtuosic coloratura passage—a series of runs and decorative flourishes on a sustained vowel that she demands her shadow repeat. “A te!” [to you!]. Her “shadow,” at long last, obliges; we hear, quite distinctly, Callas articulate a “shadow” voice that will gain distinction over the course of the aria. Dinorah and shadow spar friskily with one another, exchanging vocal flourishes.

At about 2 minutes into the aria, the tempo accelerates, and the exchange becomes more rapid, the phrases more brief. In these quick exchanges, the difference between the Dinorah voice and the shadow voice becomes easier to distinguish. This vocal difference anticipates the full separation of the voice and shadow at about 2’20”, when the echo “returns” a phrase an octave lower from the source, indicating a moment where the shadow voice gains a certain autonomy.

The vocal line slows for a moment, becoming almost reflective, as if Dinorah has been made uncertain by the

sudden alteration in the echo of her voice. A series of tentative trills that anticipate ever wider ascending interval leaps stretch the voice and stall the progress of the aria. As if trying to find the orchestra again, the melody takes a different tactic with a series of descending portandos (slides) as the tempo slows. It feels like a moment of freedom, where the shadow seems to fully detach from its source and has learned to respond, that the aria comes full circle.

As if unable to sustain the psychic dilation of the double voicing, the lead melodic material and original tempo return abruptly at about 3 minutes. Dinorah's voice and body are snapped back into their original state, simultaneously singing and dancing. The shadow voice, which had been so distinct only a moment before, has been integrated back into the stable waltz rhythm and melody.

Callas, in this recording, deploys her unique vocal timbre to turn the more polarizing aspects of her vocal production, in particular a certain "hooded" quality of her middle range that has been called both rich and "veiled," to an advantage. Her manipulation of timbre goes beyond the straightforward binary of *forte/pianissimo* [loud/soft] or *accelerando/ritardando* [acceleration/slowing] used by other sopranos to create vocal difference. Instead, she undertakes the daunting task of creating an authentic acoustic rendering of an echo.

An echo, of course, is more than simply the repetition of a sound at a lower volume. Just as a shadow thrown by light is not a mirror image of the original, an echo is not an exact, merely diminished, reproduction of its source. When sound waves hit an obstacle, the materiality of that reflecting

surface directly affects the waves as they are returned to the listening ear. The distance between the receiver and the source of the echo also affects the character of the sound; this is what creates the Doppler effect, or change in pitch that occurs when a sounding object is moving through space. An echo, depending on the space that produces it, is distorted by the materials and movements that shape the sound.

Dinorah, singing in a mountain grotto, might expect her voice to echo back from the relatively smooth, hard, and stable surfaces of stone cliffs, creating a clear, accurate return of pitch. The relative humidity of the air and distance through which the sound waves move, however, will soften the amplitude of the wave, stripping the original of some its audible characteristics, such as vibrato and warmth, while plosive and fricative consonants, (*p*, *t*, *f*, *s*, for example) which are formed by interrupting or narrowing the flow of air in vocal production, will become more indistinct as their distinguishing attributes within the sound wave are diminished.

The difficulty in producing the shadow/echo voice in “*Ombra leggera*” is specifically one of resonating space—the echo is produced within the interior of the mouth and throat, not by the surrounding environment. In this regard, Callas exceeds most singers with her particularly intuitive production of sound, and awareness of her own timbre and vocal space. In this recording, she makes use of the dark, “covered” aspect of her middle range, accentuating its already hollow quality by vocalizing her initial runs and flourishes on an “a” vowel in a way that is focused vertically in the middle of the mouth, as opposed to more forward, toward the front

of the hard palate and the teeth. (The difference is equivalent to the English placement of the vowel in a phrase like “Aren’t you?,” as opposed to the American placement.)

This specific vowel placement makes it easier for her to create the echo effect for the shadow voice; she is able to quickly shift the placement of her voice within her pharyngeal resonance, switching between the more forward “Dinorah” sound, and the more recessed “shadow” sound.

The subtle difference between the two voices, almost indistinguishable at first, becomes clearer with repeat listening. Callas develops the shadow voice gradually. At first, the shadow voice doesn’t sound significantly different from how Callas is voicing Dinorah, but as the exchange becomes more developed, Callas changes the color of her vocal sound to give each of the voices a distinct, timbral identity.

In the initial section of exchange between Dinorah and her shadow, at about 1’30” the echo is a subtle one—barely a *diminuendo* of the original. As the exchange gains in tempo, and the shadow becomes more concrete as a vocal entity, Callas makes a shift in her sound. While maintaining the cave-like aperture in the pharynx, Callas focuses the sound farther back in her mouth while slightly lowering the soft palate and lifting the back side-edges of the tongue. This not only diminishes and recedes the sound but the narrowing and widening of the vocal space alters the quality of the vowel. (The act of yawning, and then trying to smile while yawning, approximates this “shadow space.”)

As a result of this vocal manipulation, the vibrato and the upper partials in the notes are dulled—as if echoing off a hard surface. Callas accentuates the stripped timbre of the

“shadow” voice by moving the “Dinorah” vocalization of the exchange more to the front of the mouth as the scene progresses—the brighter timbre of this *a* vowel strengthens the contrast between original and shadow. Two distinct timbres are expressed, suggesting two different resonating spaces *within the same body*.

Meyerbeer has set the stage, quite literally, in both the narrative and the score, for a potential articulation of what could be conceived of, in modern psychopathology, as a split-personality. Callas fulfills the promise of the score with exacting skill, splitting the site of vocal emission (i.e., the character Dinorah) in two, establishing parallel sites of echo-location within the singing body. Working like a psychic architect, Callas creates the impression of an interior within which both the shadow voice echoes and in which the origin of the shadow voice resides.

This is not ventriloquism. Rather than moving outward to attach to the shadow, the voice retreats inward, giving the impression, acoustically, as if it is reflecting within a space inside the body. Her vocalization suggests a space of psychic interiority, a subconscious. Callas articulates a schizophrenic state through her deployment of technique and awareness of vocal color.

When *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* was premiered in 1859, the inventor of the term “subconscious,” Pierre Janet (1859–1947), was just about to be born; the environment that would foster his dissociative theory of hysteria, however, was already in place. Though hysteria may be an ancient idea, the contemporary conception of hysteria began to gain authority

and specificity in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Under the leadership of Jean-Michel Charcot (1825–93), experiments at the Salpêtrière psychiatric teaching hospital helped to redefine hysteria as a psychological ailment. The ancient synchronicity between hysteria and the womb, however, remained; associations with female anatomy and sexual desire that originally defined the term continued to influence diagnostic criteria.

Dr. Janet hypothesized that while the primary event (*idée fixe*) of severe trauma initiates the hysterical psychic rupture, the suppression of this event instigates a secondary, imaginary fantasy related to, but not based in, actual fact. The cohesion of the subject's personality is split; reality is deferred. As an example, one might suggest a woman traumatized by her abandonment at the altar, who finds an imaginary, shadow lover via moonlight, and brings to life the secondary voice she hears in her head.

It's not documented if Meyerbeer was aware of the epistemic shift in psychopathology that was occurring in Paris while he was composing his last operas. A contemporary reviewer of Meyerbeer's work enthused, in 1855, that "We do not know of any composer in whom the spirit of the age is better reflected than in Meyerbeer" (*Musical Review and Gazette: A Journal of Sacred and Secular Music*). Meyerbeer's particular contemporaneity as an opera composer is usually attributed to his ready use of complicated and impressive new stage technologies (*Wirkung ohne Ursache* [effects without causes]). The complexities in "Ombra leggera," however, gesture toward other effects, and other causes.

The subtleties that Callas coaxes from the aria, that is, the progress of Dinorah's "inner" shadow voice from its infancy to its independence, are, of course, built on the foundation of the aria's construction and the stage directions in the score. This would suggest that Meyerbeer's work is particularly attuned to more complex aspects of his time, namely the shift in contemporary perceptions of the inner workings of the (specifically female) psyche that would drive the burgeoning field of psychology. One can envision a redemptive example of, to take a jab back at Wagner, a *Wirkung mit Ursache*—that is, an effect *with* a cause—the splitting of the voice in the aria as a sign of hysterical, psychic rupture.

And yet these artistic enactments of what would come to be known as hysteria are not implicit in the score—no matter what kind of latent expressive potential lies dormant in the structure of the aria, without an intuitive singer, such associations remain unawakened. Thus, Maria Callas's work is essential, and her specific performance on this album reveals the aria has the potential to express a mid-nineteenth-century zeitgeist that shaped both science and the arts alike.

Ironically, the very cultural shift that Callas is elaborating with her remarkable interpretation will be that which, in turn, helps to devalue her artistic labor. The complicity of female performance and the invention of hysteria continues to cast a long shadow. The pathologization of the public expressions of the female body, and the fantasies that surround this process, are irreconcilably linked with Jean-Martin Charcot's diagnostic methods. In the medical theater in the hospital, in front of a rapt audience, Charcot would display and provoke hysterical symptoms from his female patients, ostensibly under

the influence of hypnosis. Contortions, uncontrolled facial twitches, stiffness or inoperability of limbs, tremors, ecstatic cries—Dr. Charcot’s productions inflamed the imagination of the public, and made passive objects of his patients.

The blurring of the border between the theatrical stage and the medical theater was not lost upon artistic practitioners. When studying for the role of Adriana Lecouvreur in 1897, the celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt took a cell at the Salpêtrière asylum to “see the mad ones” and hone her technique. The disempowerment of the female subject through hypnosis inspired fantasy fiction that ranged from the erotic to the gory, from Jules Claretie’s medical romance *L’amour d’un interne* (1881) to a scene in Léon Daudet’s grim, anti-medical science fiction novel *Les Morticoles* (1894) to the horror reenactment in André de Lourde’s *Une Leçon à la Salpêtrière* (1908) for the Grand Guignol Theater.

Trilby (1894), a novel by Franco-English author George du Maurier published the year after Charcot’s death, is one of the more striking works of fiction influenced by the fantasy of hysteria. In the novel, the tragic (and tone-deaf) heroine, Trilby, falls under the thrall of a demonic mesmerist, Svengali. Svengali, entranced by the timbre of Trilby’s voice, which is held back by her inability to sing, takes her under his wing. She becomes one of the most celebrated singers of the day, “La Svengali,” all while performing in a hypnotic state. When Svengali dies of a heart attack in the midst of one of her performances, Trilby awakes and is unable to continue singing; her health and career in ruins without her “master,” she goes mad and dies.

Although *Trilby* is a work of fiction, the reduction and erasure of the autonomy of the female performing subject by various means has been and continues to be commonplace. As much as hypnosis is an expression of absolute control in the novel, it could be a metaphor for the diagnostic gaze, the critical ear, the overweening producer. In particular, the conflation of the hysterical body and the singing body, brought successfully to perform under the control of an external power, affirms and reinforces the authority of the interrogator. Svengali recognizes in *Trilby* what she herself cannot see or hear, or has repressed. Her singing ability is the beautiful hysterical symptom, a transcendent expression beyond her control.

The fantasy of the novel reveals the most problematic aspect of early research on hysteria—the lack of distinction between the deliberate affectations of an artistic performer and the externalizations of the disturbed subject. What might seem to be a failure of scientific classification, however, appears to be, in hindsight, anything but; on the contrary, the medicalization of aberrant female behavior was a clinical reaffirmation of an already present desire: to explain, diagnose, and control the eruptive or excessive woman.

Callas cannot simply be reduced to temperamental hysterical diva or self-disciplined singing machine, though one reimagining is more seductive, and more glamorous, than the other. The Romantic appeal of libidinous emotional excess eclipses the mundanity of years of hard work and self-discipline. But thinking about and reevaluating the importance of technique and vocal production is not merely analytical reduction—it gives agency back to the

real producer: the singer. A reevaluation of Callas as a sophisticated vocal laborer not only gives her autonomy as an artist, it also has the potential to reflect back on the work itself, and the imbrication of cultural and social contexts. More than a mere “vessel” for the artistic spirit, a singer who has mastery over technique and instrument can transform an exercise in virtuosity into a complex embodiment of signification that tests the boundaries of conventional interpretations and histories.

8

Delibes, *Lakmé*, Act II

Dov'è l'indiana bruna [The Bell Song]

Léo Delibes's (1836–91) last opera, the lush, orientalist *Lakmé*, may well have fallen into obscurity if not for this aria, which has enjoyed such prominence as an obligatory concert staple for ambitious sopranos that the American author and opera enthusiast Ethan Mordden once quipped that it was “something of a famous aria, surrounded by an opera” (Mordden, 62).

For many sopranos, the aria represents a rite of passage, or a gauntlet, in their career—to master it is to join the ranks of celebrated stars like Amelita Galli-Curci, Luisa Tetrazzini, and Joan Sutherland. Not only does the demand of the coloratura make this aria such a challenge but its punishing length, as the average performance, at over 8 minutes long, is also a test of vocal endurance and breath control. The alluring French-American soprano Lily Pons, who started her career singing the role of Lakmé in 1928, performed the Bell Song in the sentimental romantic-comedy *I Dream too much*, (1935), albeit in a version that was edited down to four minutes. In more recent years, the Bell Song has been

outpaced in popular culture by the popularity of the so-called Flower Duet (“Sous le dôme épais”) from Act I, which was most notably adapted by Yanni and punk promoter Malcom McLaren in the late 1980s as the theme song for British Airways.

The opera is set in British-occupied India. The beautiful priestess Lakmé encounters an English officer named Gerald, one of a group of English tourists, trespassing on sacred ground. Gerald and Lakmé are immediately drawn to one another, angering Lakmé’s father, the Brahmin high-priest Nilakantha, who swears vengeance against the foreign occupiers. Nilakantha decides to use his daughter to lure the young Englishman out of the crowd, and in Act II, he forces his daughter to sing in the public market.

Lakmé, obeying this patriarchal demand, sings the Bell Song, the story of a poor peasant girl who, while wandering in the forest, comes across a stranger cornered by wild animals. The girl intervenes with a magic wand topped by a bell, charming the animals and saving the stranger, who turns out to be Vishnu in disguise. Lakmé expresses these bell passages with flights of delicate, complex coloratura; as if bringing the magic qualities of the bell in the tale to life, Lakmé’s voice, too, has magic properties. Her lover, Gerald, is lured out of the listening crowd. Upon seeing him, Lakmé collapses and her father pounces, stabbing and wounding Gerald before fleeing the scene.

Lakmé premiered in Paris in 1883, joining a burgeoning subgenre of artworks focused on exotic, if not outright orientalist, themes. In much of French opera and vocal music at this time there is a preoccupation with remote, native

topics and aesthetics, including the Arabic themes in Camille Saint-Saens's *Samson et Dalila* (1877), the imagined Ceylon in Georges Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863), and the exotic new land discovered by Vasco da Gama in Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865). The Parisian intellectual scene may have been dominated by the veristic, naturalist prose of writers like Emile Zola, or the social dramas of Gustave Flaubert and Alexandre Dumas *fils* (whose 1848 *La Dame aux camélias* would form the basis for Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata*), but French colonial expansion during the nineteenth century inspired preoccupation with another type of "naturalism"—the exotic alterity of a Rousseauian noble savage and his romanticized environment.

The proliferation of artworks and novels dealing with exotic lands and tales coincided with the imperialist undertakings of both the Second and Third French Empires during the nineteenth century, beginning with the invasion of Algeria in 1830, and including but not limited to subjugation of the native Tahitians in the Franco-Tahitian War (1844–7), the colonization of Senegal starting in 1848, the protectorate of Cambodia (1863), and the consolidation of territories in the formation of French Indochina and French Polynesia. The near constant acquisition and attrition of foreign lands into the French empire, as well as the ebb and flow of the French military and academy to and from these lands, left its mark on French culture. The libretto for *Lakmé*, written by Edmond Gondinet and Philippe Gille, has been said to have been inspired by the semi-autobiographical novel *Raraku* (1880) by French author Pierre Loti, and short stories by French explorer and writer Théodore Pavie (see Cronin

and Klier, 1996). Both authors owe their encounter with the exotic to the infrastructures of colonial expansion; Loti ended up in Tahiti as part of his naval training, while Pavie came from a family accustomed to living on the frontiers of French expansion, particularly in the United States. As literary critic Edward Said noted, there was a “virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist and philosopher” during the nineteenth century, and Paris was its capital (Said, 50).

The interpretation of foreign cultures in the French arts was often more enthusiastic than accurate (and received by an equally excited, but poorly informed, public). The French orientalist style had less to do with cultural specifics than with a vague sense of the exotic, evoked by a pastiche of signifiers that created a “charming” contrast to all things European. While some exoticism was indicated by mere scene setting—as with Bizet’s *Les pêcheurs de perles*, which despite its exotic location generally followed Continental musical conventions—other musical works exhibited distinct, exotic sonic characteristics. In the Bell Song, a collection of musical elements create an impression of exoticism: the use of the Aeolian mode (natural minor), the leap of the sixth within the melody (in the Italian version that Callas performs on this album on the opening line “Dov’è andro”), the use of syncopated rhythm, the sound of the tambourine and bells, as well as the spare orchestration that showcases the nasal timbre of the reed instruments. Rather than reproducing characteristics specific to Indian classical music, Delibé’s composes an atmosphere of vague, exotic sonorities that code Lakmé’s aria as “foreign” for French, nineteenth-century ears.

This lack of any sonic cultural specificity aligns with nineteenth-century French notions of the Orient as a “perfumed” space, a sensibility captured by Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) in poems like *Parfum exotique* / The Exotic Perfume, from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857):¹

Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud
 d'automne,
 Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,
 Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux
 Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone;

[When, with both my eyes closed, on a hot autumn night,
 I inhale the fragrance of your warm breast
 I see happy shores spread out before me,
 On which shines a dazzling and monotonous sun;]

Ephemeral, cloying, and intoxicating, the focus on atmospheric alterity allows for sensual immersion that both overwhelms and obscures. The poem *Correspondences* creates an atmosphere of sensuous decadence that imbricates the intoxicating qualities of scent and sound:

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
 Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
 —Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

¹Baudelaire's poetry has inspired many composers. His poems have been set to music not only by classical composers Claude Debussy, Gabriel Faure, and Henri Duparc but also by Diamanda Galás and The Cure.

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
 Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
 Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

[There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
 Sweet as oboes, green as meadows

—And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,

With power to expand into infinity,
 Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
 That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.]

Like perfume filling the nostrils, sounds fill the ears. Lakmé's aria begins with a striking, lengthy non-lexical passage, nearly unaccompanied and sung in free time. The exotic, clustered flourishes in the melody emphasize that this is a moment of "native" vocalization, of alterity within the otherwise standard, Western Romantic tonality of the opera. As the song progresses, there is an evolving exchange between the moments of storytelling and other, non-lexical moments of coloratura. While the framing of the aria might presume an equal balance between the telling of the tale and the enacting of the bell, the flights of vocal prowess soon dominate the performance, the "pure voice" bursting forth at the seams of the storytelling like a second voice as if Lakmé, possessed, can't prevent her voice from becoming pure instrument.

This is an aria where, to paraphrase music historian Carolyn Abbate in *Unsung Voices* (1991), enunciation trumps utterance, where Lakmé's status as instrument is emphasized by flights of elaborate, non-lexical coloratura. Her body, of course, is one under duress; she is an instrument under

patriarchal control, aesthetic musical bait used to lure her foreign lover out of the crowd. Her powerlessness resolves any discomfort about the role her voice plays in this scene; she becomes a feminine vessel through which the will of her father moves and expresses. More importantly, her voice is more than an alluring perfume—Lakmé's voice is irresistible, like a drug. The combination of the female mystique with an abstract exotic alterity amplifies the metaphysical power of the voice itself. Like the artist interpretations of opium-induced fever-dreams (Figure 5), the bends and curves of the coloratura passages mark curves as voluptuous as a female form sketched in smoke. Her exotic femininity is extracted from the body and melts into air.

To modern ears, the orientalist musical gestures in the Bell Song may come off as trite, or even comic. At best, the aria feels antiquated, and not in a good way—more Hummel figurine than Hepplewhite settee. It is not only the sound but the form that makes the piece difficult to enjoy. The significant pauses and the stylistic difference between the portions of the aria give the impression of a series of vignettes rather than a cohesive whole. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as Lakmé, an instrument under the power of her father, attempting different tunes to attract the Englishman. On the other, it might simply be Delibes's desire to showcase, in as many ways as possible, the abilities of a star soprano, in this case American soprano Marie van Zandt, for whom the role was written.

In this performance Callas is in good form, though the opening roulades sound restrained, almost repressed, and there are moments where the accuracy of pitch is



Figure 5 *The Opium Smoker's Dream*; Postcard circa 1900.

faulty enough to be distracting. In its own right it is a fine interpretation, and yet it feels obligatory in comparison to other performances on the album. However, even a mediocre Callas is still Callas. Her weak performances only seem to enhance the superb delivery and emotional

craftsmanship of her finest. Repeat listening, one of the luxuries afforded by the recorded archive, allows for compensatory recall where, once activated like overtones within memory, the best of her recordings fill in the gaps of her weakest.

Recordings also form the foundation of the “Callas Cult,” as it is described by Wayne Koestenbaum. Since Callas’s death, there have been various attempts to keep the legend alive with tributes, transformations, and even attempts at revivification. Besides Base Hologram’s * approximation and Marina Abramović’s operatic seance, Celine Dion paid homage to Callas on her 2007 album *D’elles*, where the track “La Diva” is written about Callas and samples a performance of Puccini’s *La Bohème*. In press photos for the album, Dion was transformed into a Callas look-alike by celebrity makeup artist Kevin Aucoin. A recent “opera music video” for a project called *Glass Handel* by countertenor Anthony Ross Constanzo depicts the American actress Marissa Tomei progressively transformed into the Callas cipher of red lips and cat’s eyes by makeup artist James Kaliardos.

The director and Callas collaborator Franco Zeffirelli, who once chastised fellow director Pier Paolo Pasolini for allegedly “abusing” the diva in *Medea* by separating the performer from her voice, attempted his own kind of Callas revivification for *Callas Forever* (2002). After Greek soprano Teresa Stratas refused the role, Zeffirelli cast French actress Fanny Ardant to play the diva. Ardant was already well-versed in Callas’s gestures and body language, as she had recently personified Callas on the stage in the French translation of Terence McNally’s play *Master Class* (1995),

directed by Roman Polanski. (Dixie Carter, Patti LuPone, and Tyne Daly all played Callas at some time in the original English version of the play.)

Callas Forever is set in the last year of Callas's life. One of her former agents, played by Jeremy Irons, convinces the fictional Callas to regain her lost glory by performing a role on screen that she never performed on the stage: Bizet's *Carmen*. Callas's voice is no longer fit for performance, but her agent suggests that she lip-synch to her old recordings, thus grafting the past onto the present. In turn, Callas/Ardant wishes to regain her lost voice by revisiting and reworking one of her most famous roles, the heroine in Puccini's *Tosca*.

In essence, this is a film in search of lost time. Zeffirelli, who never got the chance to create an opera for the screen with Callas performing (it is rumored that Callas refused his offers more than once), finally gets "Callas" before his camera. The imagined Callas/Ardant of the film attempts to time-travel back to her prime via her own archive. In choosing to imagine the last months of Callas's life, in which she was notoriously hermetic, the film searches for moments that Callas herself was determined to keep private. Tellingly, Zeffirelli's assumption that Callas mourned her lost voice, to the degree that she would compromise her own artistic standards and risk public humiliation in an attempt to recapture lost glory, affirms many of the clichés about the voice explored in other chapters of this book. (One can imagine an alternative—in her retirement, might not Callas have felt relieved to be free of this vocal burden, which threatened so often to eclipse, or even overshadow, the woman herself?)

But how Callas might have thought about her own voice is not so important in these narratives; those who love Callas's voice mourn its loss, and this is a Callas of their imagination and she mourns with them. The inability to fully recapture the magic of Callas performing in person only increases the allure of the lost moment, reinforcing both her singularity and her absence. Her voice, of course, is the essential element. Many singers have copied Callas's mannerisms, pacing, and pronunciation, and a few have even come close to approximating her timbre, but when compared to the recordings, their emulations fall short. Inevitably, any attempt to recapture the Callas mystique centers around her recordings—the authentic documents of her labor and power, and evidence of her unreproducible singularity.

In contemporary terms, the idiosyncrasy of the mature, acculturated human voice can be seen as a kind of personal intellectual property. Vocal recognition has long been a performing artist's cultural capital, and singers with unique voices have had to suffer imitation, sometimes to the extent that it is difficult to tell the original from the imitator. In the mid-1980s, Frito-Lay used an impersonator in a radio commercial for Doritos that sounded so much like the singer-songwriter Tom Waits that Waits took the company to court and won more than two and a half million dollars for the uncanny impression of his signature growl. Wait's lawyers used *Midler v. Ford Motor Company* (1986) as precedent; singer Bette Midler won a case against the auto giant for using a convincing voice double to sing her 1970s hit "Do you wanna dance" for a car ad after Midler refused.

Both Waits and Midler won their cases with the defense that, though the imitator's voices were not *exactly* like their own, they were close enough to have convinced listeners that they had been performing. The stylistic conventions and demands of opera singing make the imitation of a unique opera voice more of a challenge. Until now, attempts at a Callas replication have been limited by her recorded archive. Base Hologram's® Callas "performer," after all, would have, quite literally, nothing to sing without Callas's recordings. The plot of Zeffirelli's Callas fantasy hinges upon the authenticity of the diva's singing voice, even in relation to her fictional self. Vocal singularity is not only indicative of artistic autonomy, however, it can also be used as the basis for formal authentication in systems and structures of social control.

The FBI has long been using the voice as a form of identification for both security and surveillance. In contrast to speech recognition, a technology used to recognize and identify phonemes (parts of words), voice recognition is a biometric method that measures both the physical characteristics of the vocal process, such as timbre, pitch, and volume, as well as paralinguistic behaviors like inflection or dialect. Voice recognition is so reliable that it is often described as a kind of "sonic fingerprint."

Cyber security companies identify two types of vocal recognition: a "constrained mode," where vocal identification is dependent on definitive speech patterns, like the recitation of a password or code, and "unconstrained mode," where software is designed to identify vocal traits that are lexically independent. As an FBI website notes, this second method

is particularly helpful when “the individual submitting the sample may be unaware of the collection or unwilling to cooperate.”²

Ironically, the recognition software developed for technologies that depend upon vocal uniqueness threaten the very specificity that makes such technologies useful. Modified to perform a generative function, to create rather than recognize a voice, recognition software could potentially reproduce what has long been the purview of the performing body. Recent developments in audio spectral analysis promise the reproduction of a unique voice independent of its origin. The Canadian startup Lyrebird, named after the Australian songbird able to mimic natural and artificial sounds in its environment, has designed a plug-in to synthesize a speaking voice after only one minute of input material. Now part of the platform *descript.com*, the application offers “ultra-realistic voice cloning,” a proposition tempered somewhat by the subsequent comparison to editing software for visual images, where the Lyrebird AI is said to offer “text-informed speech inpainting.” In 2016, Adobe presented (but did not subsequently release) a similar software called *AdobeVoco*, a generative voice software designed to be part of the Adobe Creative Cloud. Both *AdobeVoco* and *Lyrebird* were ostensibly created to lower the cost of audio production, offering a cheap solution for replacing or editing pre-recorded texts without having to bring in a live performer.

²https://ucr.fbi.gov/fingerprints_biometrics/biometric-center-of-excellence/files/speaker-recognition.pdf

The ramifications of such software for the production of vocal “deep fakes,” however, are not lost on its creators. In an ethics statement on the Descript website, the developers affirm that

[w]e believe you should own and control the use of your digital voice. Descript uses a process for training speech models that depends on verbal consent verification, ensuring that our customers can only create text to speech models that have been authorized by the voice’s owner. Once created, the voice owner has control over when and how it is used.

No mention is made, however, about posthumous voices. In the case of a deceased performing artist, who owns the aesthetic intellectual property rights of a singer’s sound? In the case of an artist like Callas, when does the fetish object of a recording cease to be the memento mori of the beloved performer and, instead, become a cache of minable data for an uncanny *reumazione*?

If the ownership of a deceased artist’s recordings is equivalent to control over the voice, perhaps in the future the market will be flooded with new Callas recordings, with Warner Music, like some corporate version of Lakmé’s father Nilakantha, forcing a Callas AI to sing roles the living Callas never sang, editing existing recordings with corrected phrasing, rejuvenating old recordings with a young Callas voice. An album like *Lyric and Coloratura Arias* is transformed from a terminal object into an antecedent for a whole new practice, unconcerned about authenticity. The question of authenticity, after all, is merely a discussion

of property rights tethered to a history of production: a handshake between origins and profit. But if an ostensibly “authentic” recording becomes an originator in and of itself because of the data it contains, what is then authentic? When untethered from an originating body, the question of vocal authenticity becomes moot—the voice is reduced to a system of patterns and permissible variables that are classified and deployed. Thus ends a possible aesthetics of authenticity, and we are left with . . . what?

In *Languages of Art* (1976) the American philosopher Nelson Goodman confronts the dilemma of authenticity in the visual arts with a comparison to music. For Goodman, music is an “allographic” art; there is no distinction between an original and its forgery, as there would be in the “autographic” arts. The value of a painting by Vermeer is not necessarily in its appearance (an identical copy offers the same visual pleasure), but in the presumption of and investment in origin, and thus history. In music, on the contrary, every performance is valid as a work, criticisms of performance notwithstanding, as long as it adheres to the logic of the symbols (musical notation) in the score. Callas singing Lakmé, for example, is no less an authentic performance of the role than Lily Pons singing Lakmé. Recordings, however, are “autographic,” like a painting—the investment in Callas’s recordings is that they are directly connected to an historical moment, and to her body. Like the brushstrokes of a master, the timbre and expression of her voice mark the performances as unique to Callas.

For Goodman, the allographic arts represent a kind of emancipation from the metaphysical burden of authenticity,

but what happens when an autographic work, such as an original audio recording, is nullified by an allographic transformation? How might AI that mines performance data for expression reshape the way we think about performance and performing artists?

In Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 dystopian TV movie *Welt am Draht* [World on a Wire], the main character, Fred Stiller, must enter a simulated world in order to solve the suicide of one of the world's "identity units." This manufactured universe, created to do market research without the inconvenience of querying real people, is populated with individual units unaware that they are living in a simulated world. In one scene, Stiller spends some time in a bar where, on stage, a hologram Marlene Dietrich, circa 1944, sings beside a Vegas-era hologram Elvis. The convergence of historical figures in this fabricated world works twofold—it gestures at an entertainment futurity created by generative technology as well as a cultural environment of self-imposed impotence. Elvis and Dietrich, as ciphers for "entertainment," fill the gap in this universe as a kind of pre-chewed nostalgia, or nostalgia for nostalgia's sake.

Compare this to another vision of the future, that of the series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which ran from 1987 to 1994. There are many puzzling and problematic instances of music in the series, including an overrepresentation of nineteenth-century chamber music and excruciating examples of "alien" musicality, but no plot device squanders more creative potential than the spaceship's "holodeck." Unfortunately, although the holodeck is a magical room

beyond the limits of space, time, and simple physics, the crew members mostly use it for mundane recreational activities when they are bored of being in space. In episode “11001001,” one of the leading characters, Lieutenant Riker, visits a “jazz club” in the holodeck, where he meets the aptly named Minuet, a hologram muse who enchants him with her crooked smile and weary double entendres. Jazz, in this fantasy, is reduced to a collage of various sign-vehicles that converge in the figure of Minuet, the woman-hologram of jazz. For all his infatuation with Minuet, Riker’s relationship with her is a chaste one, and she, and the whole fantasy, are at his disposal. Riker’s encounter with the cultural phenomenon of “jazz” is beyond any conventional notion of nostalgia; there is no recognizable past in this fantasy, as any cultural specificity has been atomized into a general “jazz” program that can be controlled, and erased, at will.

Fassbinder’s simulation and *Star Trek’s* jazz holodeck are allographic universes on a grand scale, culture reduced to symbol-systems that can be reproduced at will, where the visual and sonic symbol language of a Dietrich and an Elvis can be made compatible on a cyber-stage, just as the vague aesthetics of jazz, in a generic club-like space, are both personified and sterilized in the figure of a holographic woman. The public in these fantasies are subject less to a performance than put under the spell of an historical perfume—a pastiche of visual and sonic symbols that indicate rather than act, that hint at origins both evocative and obscure. Despite the potency of such diffused artistic matter, the palette of sensations evoked in both science fiction

universes is sanitized and safe: no pheromones, no sweat, no tears. Just as the abstract perfume of French Orientalism gestured toward, but ultimately rejected, the actual sensory facts of the foreign lands that it mined for data, these sci-fi worlds offer up culture like an Odysseian lotus—to consume, and forget, and dream.

The potentials of generative software seem to be limitless. Artists can ostensibly “live” forever—at least in a way that we, the consumers, want them to. The performing body, and all its labor, is nullified by a curious form of technological matricide, the artifact cannibalized in the service of regeneration.

The future could be a market glutted with ghosts. Then again, it seems we may already be halfway there.

Acknowledgments

Verdi, *I Vespri Siciliani*, Act V

Mercè, dilette amiche [Thank
you, beloved friends]

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Appendix

Aria Texts and Translations

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act I: Io son l'umile ancella

Ecco, respiro appena,
Io son l'umile ancella del genio creator;
Ei m'offre la favella io la diffondo ai cor . . .
Del verso io son l'accento,
L'eco del dramma uman, il fragile strumento
vassallo della man . . .
Mite, gioconda, atroce,
Mi chiamo Fedeltà;
Un soffio è la mia voce, che al novo di morrà .

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act I: I am the humble servant

Look, I am barely breathing,
I am the humble servant of the creator genius;
He offers me speech that I give to others' hearts . . .
I am the accent of the verse,
the echo of the human drama, the fragile instrument
Lowly handmaiden . . .

Timid, playful, terrible,
 My name is Fidelity;
 My voice is just a whisper, that, with the new day,
 will die.

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act IV: Poveri fiori

Poveri fiori, gemme de' prati,
 pur ieri nati, oggi morenti,
 quai giuramenti d'infido cor!
 L'ultimo bacio, o il bacio primo, ecco v'imprimo,
 soave e forte bacio di morte, bacio d'amor.
 Tottu è finito!
 Col vostro olezzo muoia il disprezzo:
 con voi d'un giorno senza ritorno cessi l'error!
 Tutto è finito!

Cilea, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Act IV: Poor flowers

Poor flowers, buds of the meadows,
 Born yesterday, dying today,
 What oaths of a treacherous heart!
 The last kiss, or the first kiss, here I impress upon you,
 sweet and strong kiss of death, kiss of love.
 Everything is finished!
 Scorn dies with your perfume:
 Let, with you, the mistake of one day die,
 never to return.
 Everything is finished!

**Giordano, *Andrea Chénier*, Act III:
La mamma morta**

La mamma morta m'hanno alla porta
della stanza mia; moriva e mi salvava!
poi a notte alta io con Bersi errava,
quando ad un tratto un livido bagliore
guizza e rischiara innanzi a' passi miei
la cupa via! Guardo! Bruciava il loco di mia culla!
Così fui sola! E intorno il nulla!
Fame e miseria! Il bisogno, il periglio!
Caddi malata, e Bersi, buona e pura,
di sua bellezza ha fatto un mercato, un
contratto per me!
Porto sventura a chi bene mi vuole!
Fu in quel dolore che a me venne l'amor!
Voce piena d'armonia e dice:
"Vivi ancora! Io son la vita! Ne' miei occhi è il tuo cielo!
Tu non sei sola! Le lacrime tue io le raccolgo!
Io sto sul tuo cammino e ti sorreggo!
Sorridi e spera! Io son l'amore!
Tutto intorno è sangue e fango?
Io son divino! Io son l'oblio!
Io sono il dio che sopra il mondo
scendo da l'empireo, fa della terra un ciel! Ah!
Io son l'amore, io son l'amor, l'amor"
E l'angelo si accosta, bacia, e vi bacia la morte!
Corpo di moribonda è il corpo mio. Prendilo dunque.
Io son già morta cosa!

Giordano, *Andrea Chénier*, Act III: Mother is dead

They killed my mother at the door
 To my room; she died and saved me!
 Then, in the dead of night, I wandered with Bersi,
 When suddenly a livid gleam before me
 flashed, and lighting my steps
 The dark street! Look! My childhood home
 was burning!
 So I was alone! And around me nothing!
 Hunger and misery! Want and danger!
 I fell ill, and Bersi, good and pure,
 Sold her beauty, for my sake!
 I bring misfortune to all who love me!
 It was in that pain that love came to me!
 A voice full of harmony it says:
 “Live still! I am life! Heaven is in my eyes!
 You are not alone! I will take your tears!
 I will go with you and support you!
 Smile and hope! I am love!
 All around is blood and mud?
 I am divine! I am oblivion!
 I am the god who descends to earth
 From the empyrean, making of the earth a heaven! Ah!
 I am love, I am love, I am love.”
 And the angel approaches, and kisses me, and in that kiss
 is death!
 The body of a dying woman is my body. Take it then.
 I am already dead!

Catalani, *La Wally*, Act I: Ebben? Ne andrò lontana

Ebben! Ne andrò lontana
 come va l'eco pia campana,
 là fra la neve bianca,
 là fra le nubi d'òr;
 laddóve la speranza, la speranza
 è rimpianto, è rimpianto, è dolor!

O della madre mia casa gioconda
 la Wally ne andrà da te, da te,
 lontana assai, e forse a te,
 e forse a te, non farà mai più ritorno,
 nè più la rivedrai!
 Mai più, mai più!

Ne andrò sola e lontana,
 là fra la neve bianca, n'andrò,
 N'andrò sola e lontana
 e fra le nubi d'òr!

Catalani, *La Wally*, Act I: Well? Then I'll go away

Well? Then I will go away
 Just as the pious bell does,
 There among the white snow,
 there among the clouds of gold;
 where hope, hope
 Is regret, is regret, is sorrow!

O my mother's playful home
 Wally will go from you, from you,
 far away, and perhaps never to return
 and perhaps never to see you again,
 Nor shall you see her again!
 Never again, never again!

I'll go alone and far away,
 There in the white snow I'll go,
 I'll go far away alone
 And through the clouds of gold!

**Boito, *Mephistophele*, Act III: L'altra
 notte in fondo al mare**

L'altra notte in fondo al mare
 Il mio bimbo hanno gittato,
 Or per farmi delirare dicon ch'io l'abbia affogato.
 Laura è fredda.
 Il carcer fosco, e la mesta anima mia
 Come il passero del bosco
 Vola, vola, vola via.
 Ah! Pietà di me!
 In letargico sopore
 E' mia madre addormentata,
 E per colmo dell'orrore dicon ch'io l'abbia
 attoscata.
 Laura è fredda.
 Il carcer fosco, ecc.

**Boito, *Mephistophele*, Act III: The other
night, in the depths of the ocean**

The other night in the depths of the ocean
My baby was thrown,
Now to make me delirious they say that I drowned him.
The air is cold.
The prison is dark, and my sad soul
Like the sparrow in the wood
Flies, flies, flies away.
Ah! Pity me!
Into lethargic slumber
my mother fell sleeping,
And now the ultimate horror they say that I
 poisoned her.
The air is cold.
The prison is dark, etc.

Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act I: Una voce poco fa

Una voce poco fa
qui nel cor mi risuonò;
il mio cor ferito è già,
e Lindor fu che il piagò.
Sì, Lindoro mio sarà;
lo giurai, la vincerò. (bis)

Il tutor ricuserà,
io l'ingegno aguzzerò.

Alla fin s'accheterà
 e contenta io resterò.
 Sì, Lindoro mio sarà;
 lo giurai, la vincerò.
 Sì, Lindoro mio sarà;
 lo giurai, sì.

Io sono docile, son rispettosa,
 sono obbediente, dolce, amorosa;
 mi lascio reggere, mi lascio reggere,
 mi fo guidar, mi fo guidar.
 Ma, ma se mi toccano dov'è il mio debole
 sarò una vipera, sarò
 e cento trappole prima di cedere
 farò giocare, giocare.

Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act I: A voice just now

A voice just now
 Sounded here in my heart;
 my heart is already wounded,
 and it was Lindor who wounded it.
 Yes, Lindor will be mine;
 I swear I will win him. (Repeat)

The tutor will refuse,
 I will sharpen my wits.
 In the end he will accept
 and I shall remain content.
 Yes, Lindoro will be mine;

I swear I will win him.
 Yes, Lindoro will be mine;
 I swear it.

I am docile, I am respectful,
 I am obedient, I am sweet, I am loving;
 I let myself be managed, I let myself be managed,
 I let myself be guided, I let myself be guided.
 But, but if they touch me where I am weak
 I will be a viper, I will be
 There will be a hundred tricks
 before I give in
 I will play, play, play . . .

**Meyerbeer, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel, ou
 Dinorah*, Act II: *Ombra leggera***

Ombra leggiera, non te n'andar, non t'involar,
 no, no, no,
 fata o chimera, sei lusinghiera, non t'involar,
 no, no, no,
 ombra, a me cara, corriamo a gara, resta con me,
 al mio piè, ah, ah! non t'involar!

Ad ogni aurora ti vo' trovar, ah, resta ancora, vieni a
 danzar,
 se resterai, se non ten vai, m'udrai cantar,
 T'appressa a me, rispondi a me, canta con me!

Ah! a te! Ah! va ben! Ah! a te! Ah! Si . . .

**Meyerbeer, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel, ou
Dinorah*, Act II: The Shadow Song**

Light shadow, don't go away, don't go away, no, no, no,
 fairy or chimera, you are flattering, do not flee,

no, no, no,

Shadow, dear to me, let us race, stay with me,
 At my feet, ah, ah! Don't run away!

At every dawn I want to find you, ah, stay still, come
 and dance,

If you stay, if you don't go, you'll hear me sing,
 Come to me, answer me, sing with me!

Ah! to you! Ah! All right! Ah! To you! Ah! Yes . . .

Delibes, *Lakmé*, Act II: Dov'è l'indiana bruna

Dov'è l'indiana bruna che I paria generâr
 Quando la bianca luna tra le mimose appar?
 Verso I muschi s'affretta la misera e scordò
 Che dovunque è rejeta chi un paria generò
 Tra le siepi di rose con vaghissime pose
 Tu la vedi passar e alla notte inneggiar

Nel fitto là—di fosca selva
 Smarrito vaga—un viator . . .
 Nell'ombra brilla l'occhio della belva
 E del cammino ei move ignaro ancor
 Ruggisce di gioja la fiera e farne sua preda già spera . . .

Ma la fanciulla accor e sfida il suo furor
 In mano ha la bacchetta da cui tintinna e fischia
 La magica squilletta dell'indo incantatori

Lo stranier la contempla—essa resta rapita
 De' suoi mille rajà più bello egli è
 Arrossirà, s'èi sa che dee la vita
 Ad una vii, che un paria generò

Ma sul suo ciglio—ei stende un velo
 E l'assopita—innalza al cielo
 Dicendo a lei: —“starai con me! . . . ”
 Wismì, di brahma—il figlio egli è

E da quel giorno—il viator
 In mezzo ai boschi—ode talor
 Breve il rumor—della bacchetta
 E il tintinnar che fa
 La squilla dell'indiano incantatori

Delibes, *Lakmé*, Act II: The Bell Song

Where is the brunette Indian born of the pariahs going
 When the white moon appears among the mimosas?
 Towards the mosses she hurries and forgets
 That overall she is rejected, as a pariah.
 Among the hedges of roses, with vague poses,
 You see her pass and sing praises to the night

In the thick there of gloomy forest
 Lost, wanders a traveler . . .

APPENDIX

In the shadows the eye of a beast shines
And, he on the path is yet unaware,
The beast roars with joy and hopes to capture some
prey . . .

But the maiden challenges and cuts short the beast's fury
In her hand is the wand which tinkles and twinkles
With the magic sound of Indian enchantment

The stranger contemplates her—she remains enraptured
With his thousand rays he is very beautiful
He would blush, if he knew that he owes his life
To an outsider, born of the pariahs

But on his brow—he spreads a veil
And lifts up to heaven the drowsy one saying to her:
“You will stay with me! . . .”
He is the son of Brahma.

And since that day—the visitor
In the midst of the woods—he sometimes hears
Briefly he hears the noise of the wand
And the tinkling that makes
The ringing of the Indian enchantment.

All translations the author's own. Some translations have been slightly altered for clarity and flow.

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| 63. <i>Elliott Smith's XO</i> by Mathew Lemay | 79. <i>Ween's Chocolate and Cheese</i> by Hank Shteamer |
| 64. <i>Nas' Illmatic</i> by Matthew Gasteier | 80. <i>Johnny Cash's American Recordings</i> by Tony Tost |
| 65. <i>Big Star's Radio City</i> by Bruce Eaton | 81. <i>The Rolling Stones' Some Girls</i> by Cyrus Patell |
| 66. <i>Madness' One Step Beyond . . .</i> by Terry Edwards | 82. <i>Dinosaur Jr.'s You're Living All Over Me</i> by Nick Atfield |
| 67. <i>Brian Eno's Another Green World</i> by Geeta Dayal | 83. <i>Television's Marquee Moon</i> by Bryan Waterman |
| 68. <i>The Flaming Lips' Zaireeka</i> by Mark Richardson | 84. <i>Aretha Franklin's Amazing Grace</i> by Aaron Cohen |
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| 87. <i>Serge Gainsbourg's Histoire
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Anderson | 103. <i>Hole's Live Through This</i> by
Anwen Crawford |
| 88. <i>They Might Be Giants' Flood</i>
by S. Alexander Reed and
Elizabeth Sandifer | 104. <i>Devo's Freedom of Choice</i> by
Evie Nagy |
| 89. <i>Andrew W. K.'s I Get Wet</i> by
Phillip Crandall | 105. <i>Dead Kennedys' Fresh Fruit for
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Stewart Foley |
| 90. <i>Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient
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Weidenbaum | 106. <i>Koji Kondo's Super Mario Bros.</i>
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| 91. <i>Gang of Four's Entertainment</i>
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Astor | 108. <i>Metallica's Metallica</i> by David
Masciotra |
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| 94. <i>The Beach Boys' Smile</i> by Luis
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George Grella Jr. |
| 95. <i>Oasis' Definitely Maybe</i> by
Alex Niven | 111. <i>Blondie's Parallel Lines</i> by
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| 96. <i>Liz Phair's Exile in Guyville</i> by
Gina Arnold | 112. <i>Grateful Dead's Workingman's
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| 97. <i>Kanye West's My Beautiful
Dark Twisted Fantasy</i> by Kirk
Walker Graves | 113. <i>New Kids On The Block's
Hangin' Tough</i> by Rebecca
Wallwork |
| 98. <i>Danger Mouse's The Grey
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| 99. <i>Sigur Rós's ()</i> by Ethan Hayden | 115. <i>Sleater-Kinney's Dig Me Out</i>
by Jovana Babovic |
| 100. <i>Michael Jackson's Dangerous</i>
by Susan Fast | 116. <i>LCD Soundsystem's Sound of
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Lordi |

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| 121. <i>Young Marble Giants' Colossal Youth</i> by Michael Blair and Joe Bucciero | 135. <i>Tori Amos's Boys for Pele</i> by Amy Gentry |
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| 127. <i>Björk's Homogenic</i> by Emily Mackay | 141. <i>Wendy Carlos's Switched-On Bach</i> by Roshanak Kheshti |
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| 131. <i>Lou Reed's Transformer</i> by Ezra Furman | 145. <i>Judy Garland's Judy at Carnegie Hall</i> by Manuel Betancourt |
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