

Singing Against the Grain: A Critique of Homogeneity in Vocal Aesthetics

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This paper aims to manifest, and discuss the consequences of, a gradual trend towards aesthetic homogeneity in the production and reception of western vocal art-music. The areas of historical overview that will be employed to substantiate this thesis are: technical changes in register unification, weighting, volume of voices and range classifications; stylistic changes in ornamentation, improvisation; and increasing scientific knowledge of the voice and developments made in amplification, recording and broadcasting technology. It will be demonstrated, by listening to brief taped extracts from Handel's *Semele* and some of my first singing lessons, that the culmination of this historical progression has led us to aesthetically privilege homogeneous sound in the western vocal "classical" tradition.

This paper will further argue that it is largely the unique teaching relationship between a singer, as both instrument and player, and their singing teacher/mentor that has perpetuated the ideology of homogeneity. It will attempt to reveal that the oral tradition of teaching operates in a similar way to the Hegelian master/slave dialectic; by taking the mortal body as its primary parchment, the structure of this teaching process has remained, largely, unchecked. Mediating Roland Barthes's notion of the "grain of the voice," it is hoped to advocate shifts in the sphere of vocal production which will enable us to embrace and experiment with a wider range of sounds.

In order to understand what is meant by homogeneity in vocal aesthetics, it is necessary to realize that it is an ideological stance which is not based upon a singular conception, but rather has come about gradually, and therefore more inconspicuously, via the historical process of several different developments in singing techniques and recording technology.¹

In approximately 1481, Tinctoris listed the qualifications of a good singer as accurate rhythm, a good sense of pitch and clear enunciation (Jander, Owen, Fallows, & Potter, 2001). This standard remained constant until the requirement to homogenize the vocal registers over their fundamental "break", which was described by Tosi in 1723:

A diligent Master, knowing that a [male] Soprano [castrato] without the Falsetto, is constrained to sing within the narrow Compass of a few Notes, ought not only to endeavour to help him to it, but also to leave no Means untried, so to unite the feigned and the natural Voice, that they may not be distinguished; for if they do not perfectly unite, the Voice will be of divers Register, and must consequently lose its Beauty.² (Jander et al., 2001, Vocal Production, ¶15)

One outcome of the project of uniting different parts of the voice was that, by the late 18th century, singers began to carry the full weight of the chest voice into the highest registers. This enabled them to sing top notes as powerfully as bottom ones, which had not been possible when using head voice or falsetto. This change in vocal production reversed the previously taught relationship of dynamic to range which was described by Johann Mattheson in 1739,

each singing voice, the higher it goes should be produced increasingly temperately and lightly: however in the low notes, according to the same rule, the voice should be strengthened, filled out and invigorated. (Jander et al., 2001, Vocal Production, ¶17)

By 1810, Corri instructed that the voice should now increase in volume as it ascended, and decrease when descending, in order to maintain a smooth sound quality throughout the range (Jander et al., 2001). However, the tone that resulted from this could never be entirely homogenized, as different voices produced varying textures. Consequently, it became necessary to classify voices into types and sub-sets, such as the dramatic-soprano or Helden-tenor. A new set of repertory that privileged concerted power over brilliance or flexibility of tone-colour followed, with a diminished range, which focussed on the strongest, most uniform, notes in the voice.

One of the distinct consequences of the cultivation of the heavier voice was the increase in vibrato singing. In the 18th century, Tosi warned singers to hold notes without any vocal "trembling," for those who do not "will become subject to a Flutt'ring in the Manner of all those that sing in very bad Taste" (Jander et al., 2001, 19th Century, ¶15). In the early 19th century, vibrato was used sparingly, as an ornament, but by the end of that century even bel canto singers began to use vibrato on every sustained note.

In addition to these gradual technical moves towards the regularity of voice production, there was also a progression towards the elimination of vocal ornamentation. The manner in which ornamentation, such as the trill, portamento or messa di voce, was adopted had previously signified the individuality of different national styles, and indeed singers, as well as particular emotions.³ By the 20th century, fewer composers were likely to assume or even desire rhythmic or melodic improvisation in performance. Stravinsky, for example, asserted that music should not be interpreted, but merely rendered by the singer.

Garcia's invention of the laryngoscope, in 1855, furthered an interest in the scientific understanding of the physiological workings of the voice as a musical instrument. The primary effect of his discoveries was that a distinction that was drawn between trained and untrained voices which had not existed in the 18th century. As it is stated in *The New Grove*, prior to this time, "the English tenor John Beard could move easily among Italian opera, English oratorio, popular ballad opera and English song" (Jander et al., 2001, 19th century, ¶19). The distinction between classical singers and popular singers created a division between vocal art and popular music—the first sought uniformity of vocal production using a low larynx position and strong muscular support whilst pop singers who used higher larynx positions, and even belting techniques, became much more open to experimentation. To this day, most people are able to differentiate between the singers from Oasis and Blur, but few would instantly recognize the individuality of tone created by Jessye Norman or Jane Eaglen.

The most significant development for vocal production in the 20th century was the advancement of amplified and recorded sound. It is ironic that it was the very medium that had the capacity to disseminate a variety of differing vocal styles, without the technical necessity of unification of registers, volume, range and embellishment (which had previously been required for projection purposes), that instead perpetuated the ideology of homogeneity in vocal art-music to an even greater degree. It is often understood that this was purely a result of the mass production of portable and durable recordings and increasingly global broadcasting, which both heightened the position and control of the conductor and enabled singers to hear

and consequently to copy one another's performances and techniques, thereby standardizing some styles and eroding others.

However, it is rarely considered that sound homogenization could have been created in the studio in order to divert attention away from the fundamental imperfections of recording. For instance, the signal generated by any microphone is too weak to actuate the rest of the apparatus in the recording process without electrical magnification. Anyone who has heard the alien tone produced by the amplification of a familiar sound will know that microphones exaggerate particular components of resonance rather than merely reproduce all formants⁴ equally at an increased volume. Which parts are enhanced depends upon the type, number and position of microphones that are used.⁵ Moreover, every recording sequence includes a compressor device designed to amplify audio-frequency signals by amounts that vary automatically with their strengths; the weakest signals are amplified most and the strongest least, so that the final volume range is "compressed" to less than that of the original.⁶ The recorded result will therefore always represent a newly created sound rather than a perfect reproduction.

The developments in stereophony, surround sound and digital recording, and the invention of portable stereos, earphones and tape and CD players for cars, all endeavour to eliminate ambient noise and, therefore, create a greater intensity of musical experience. However, these "progressions" artificially homogenize reproduced sound so successfully that they conceal the fact that recording is also a sound source which, either by hiding its methods of production (in most "classical music"), or by exaggerating them (in most "pop music"), refutes the fact that it is unable to fulfil its impossible project of total fidelity.

Whilst people accustomed to listening to the earliest recordings may well have been amazed to hear the reproduced sound quality that we have today, I am sure that many wouldn't consider contemporary vocal recordings to be superior, overall, for two main reasons. First, because the individual spontaneity of the performer and differences in musical interpretation have gradually been eroded by composers determined to guide their works into the public domain in their own way and, second, because the tone is so homogenized it hinders the subjective agency of its audience. Arguably, engagement with the earlier technical inadequacy of recording and performing techniques forced the ear into the more discerning position of listening rather than simply channelled hearing. This is illustrated by the differences between the two recordings of "Where'er You Walk" (taken from Handel's *Semele*) which are detailed in the discography.

It seems strange that there has been little resistance to, or even acknowledgement of the gradual progression towards homogeneity. This paper seeks to provide a possible explanation, which resides in the unique intimacy of the singing teacher/pupil relationship.⁷ As the singer always requires an external pair of eyes and ears to let them know what their voice sounds like, and how they come across to the audience, vocal tuition is necessarily based almost entirely upon an oral tradition.⁸ In this way, it can be seen that the practice of teaching singing is, for the most part, written upon mortal bodies, which become transformed through the "trial and error" process of learning to sing via the complex reflection of the subjective psychology or self-consciousness of singer and tutor.

This method of the vocal discovery works in a manner that is akin to the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. In short, the dialectic occurs when two self-consciousnesses confront each other—both think about the other in terms of their own self-image (for example, if I am

tired, I yawn. If I were to see you yawning, I would recognize what that means to me, and therefore make the assumption that you are tired). Each acts as a "mirror" which reflects the other, but it is more complex than this, as the mirror reflects the other reflecting itself reflecting the other, and so on.

This often happens in the relationship between singer and teacher—as both confront each other, the singer, in order to know how to sing, has a stake in reflecting the position of the tutor. Meanwhile, the coach is trying to understand the best way to teach a student and also has a stake in reflecting the student self-consciousness. Both end up reflecting the other reflecting the other etc. Whilst this recognition works to boost the sense of self of both teacher and pupil, it cannot remain equal for the teaching process to function; there needs to be a struggle in order to decide which subjective position will become the absolute aesthetic judge. The tutor invariably wins out and takes up the role of the recognized "master." The student remains as the "slave" that recognizes the position of the master, whilst the master recognizes only his or her own situation. What is at stake in this structure of learning is that the student remains at the disposition of the tutor, as the teaching process is based entirely upon trust.⁹

By forcing the student into a position in which they rely so heavily upon the tutor to tell them how they sound, this proximate teaching structure works in an elitist and almost colonial fashion to exclude any differing external aesthetic forces, and ultimately disables a more pluralistic creative spontaneity. As singer eventually becomes tutor, the aesthetics of vocal homogeneity are once again perpetuated, not because of an acknowledged totalitarian conspiracy (which could be overturned) but rather by way of an ideological self-validation of technique which, being "written on" the mortal body, has remained largely undetected. At this point in the paper, I played brief recorded examples from my first singing lessons in order to demonstrate that we still privilege the aesthetics of homogeneity in the classical vocal training of the 21st century. I asked the audience to listen out for telltale instructions for legato elision, phrasing, opening the space in the throat, keeping a line and smooth register change.

In *Image Music Text*, Roland Barthes (1977) attempts to define a new anti-homogeneous vocal aesthetic for art-music, which he names the "grain of the voice."

The "grain" of the voice is not—or is not merely—its timbre; the significance it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message). (p.185)¹⁰

The grain is therefore not the voice, but the sound produced by the action of the voice as it at once physically articulates words (in the placing of vowels and consonants) and re-articulates them (through pitch, rhythm and amplitude contrasts) in conjunction with the process of its own production of sounds. In this aesthetic, the text functions to break the spell of the teaching dialectic as the tone of the voice is clearly constructed by the libretto as well as the tutor.

It is the contention of this paper that, unless new ways of training voices are explored in more depth, or at least the impediments of the present proximate relation between tutors and pupils are acknowledged, the potential proliferation of non-homogeneous vocal styles and techniques in order to gain more colour (such as a ornamentation, the use of higher larynx positions, greater application of the resonances found in the nose, throat and mouth, etc.) will remain hampered. Perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that the true definition of legato, as

Thomas Hemsley (1988) has commented, means “bound”—not in the sense of a continuous line, but rather tied to the internal harmonic dimension and the spectrum of timbre which includes all aspects of vocal textual variety. In the contemporary age of postmodernity, avoiding this could ultimately threaten the practice of “classical” singing as a skilful art form. I ended this paper with a recorded extract taken from *Barcelona* (sung by Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé) and explained that the interesting voice, for me, in this collaboration, is the one that enables the different details of the text to shine through without attempting a false legato technique. I am sure you can guess which singer I was making reference to!

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Discography

- Handel, G.F. Where'er You Walk, from *Semele*, performed by John McCormack in 1936, recording catalogue number: ex 290 0563
- Handel, G.F. Where'er You Walk, from *Semele*, performed by John Mark Ainsley in 1988, recording catalogue number: DCD 894
- Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé singing “Barcelona” from *Barcelona*, released in 1992, recording catalogue number: 161 366

Endnotes

- Although the historical reasons for these changes are quite complex, and they didn't necessarily occur chronologically, it is necessary to give them a brief overview in this paper in order to show that homogeneity of vocal sound has increasingly been sought, almost unconsciously, as an aesthetic ideal.
- Whilst Caccini and earlier tutors had identified two vocal registers, they did not feel the need to integrate them and instead advised singers to avoid using the falsetto voice by performing arias in keys which were suitable for their “natural” voice.

- ³ It was considered correct practice up until the end of the Romantic era to show off your particular interpretation of a piece by using ornaments which would bring out the best in your voice; more adept singers also displayed the rhythmic flexibility of their rubato and even sang through rests!
- ⁴ As Taylor (2001) states: "The cavities of the throat and nose modify the harmonic-rich buzzing sound of the vocal chords and impose formants that are characteristic of the person and also of the different vowel sounds; each vowel sound—regardless of whether spoken by a male or female, adult or child—has formant peaks at well-defined frequencies."
- ⁵ A microphone placed in very close proximity to the singer will amplify sounds of swallowing and breathing that would otherwise not be heard, however, one placed further away may pick up more reverberations that have been reflected from the walls, floor and ceiling. An omni-directional microphone will amplify sounds in a given radius, but a velocity microphone will pick up sounds that occur in a figure of eight with the microphone placed at the crossover point.
- ⁶ The purpose of this is to prevent distortion or listeners having to adjust the controls continually in order to gain a steady volume.
- ⁷ In the 1780s, C.F.D. Schubart first expounded the accepted contemporary notion of expressing oneself as a subject in music, rather than merely performing it objectively. The main consequence of this was the creation of a psychological split between the singer as instrument and the singer as the "player" of this instrument. The singer that acted as an instrumentalist and listened to the sound of their "instrument," as they were performing, was found to produce a less homogenized tone, because the results were mediated by the "intellect" and therefore were considered to lack emotional spontaneity. As a result, contemporary solo singers are encouraged to stop listening to themselves as they sing and instead measure the sound quality of their voice by the "natural feel" of their muscular power and facial cavity resonances and the "feedback" they get from their teacher.
- ⁸ Whilst anyone can pick up a treatise on singing and attempt to follow the "instructions," even if they record themselves, as it has previously been argued, they will never know for certain whether they have achieved the desired effect. It is also quite clear that what appeared in singing manuals tells us more about what was not being taught, rather than what was common-place, otherwise they would not have been required!
- ⁹ As the student becomes better able to sing in a fashion that the teacher appreciates, however, the tables turn and the "master" depends more upon the "slave" (as the reputation of the teacher depends upon the public showings of the pupil's singing abilities); it seems that dialectic has now enabled the student to gain independence, however, whilst they may be able to sing as well as or even better than their tutor, they may not have the same experience of the political sphere or their teacher's contacts. Most also realize that they require the reflective services of a discerning external pair of eyes and ears for the length of their singing career. In this context, Hegel's projected synthesis occurs when both realize that each would benefit more from a mutual exchange of services rather than from domination.
- ¹⁰ Barthes illustrates this by comparing the voices of Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzéra. He argues that the (more highly trained) voice of the former is "grainless" as the singer uses a technique which homogenizes his vocal registers and aims, by "overemphasizing the bellows of his instrument" to reduce the impurities of the formants of his voice. Panzéra's use of his voice, however, is shown to contain Barthes's "grain" because he uses vocal ornamentation techniques such as portamento to expose the shift

between chest and head voice and his "tongue, glottis, mucous membrane and nose" to project the formants of his voice as part of the composition of the piece.
