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## The Permanent Live Link

"Very good, my dear Miss Callas. You know the music perfectly well. Now go home, and say it aloud to yourself, keep on saying it. Forget that you are singing and that these are the rules. Respect the rules but try to be free of them for a while: if you spoke these phrases, how would you speak them? Speak them aloud to yourself, and let's see with what phrasing, with what rhythm you come back to me tomorrow." The conductor, Tullio Serafin said this during an audition for the leading role in Bellini's *Norma*, and his words must have been among the most important lessons for Maria Callas: they come back again and again in her memories, through interviews and statements.

The link between singing and speaking is a crucial issue to which artists, as well as theoreticians, philosophers and many other thinkers from different positions and methods, have dedicated a great deal of attention.

There is a basic question behind most of their subtle and complex thinking: does melody, singing, song - music - spring from spoken language? Could we say that music is, genetically, an atrophied spoken language? As far as sound is concerned, were words amplified until they became notes, melodic line, music? A definitive answer will probably never be reached. But what is relevant, to performers as well as to music and theatre scholars, is the continuing vital link: the constant connection between the spoken and sung word.

We can focus on three elements, strictly intertwined with one another: the literal meaning of the words involved; the melodic shape; the vocal identity. If the aim is to understand how the listeners and/or the spectators grasp meaning - intellectual or emotional - from words offered to them by the singer, the first literal meaning is the most important. From a musical perspective though, that is obviously not so. Melody builds a meaning through autonomous processes.

We all know this from personal experience: how many songs have we listened to, loved, known by heart, that were

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sung in languages we could barely understand, and sometimes did not understand at all?

An example: in his perfect Utopian Republic, Plato admitted those harmonies that conveniently imitated a hero's voice and tones. Plato speaks of harmony, but from a contemporary perspective "harmony" could be translated freely as "melodic space", i.e. the set of notes - pitches - that the melody touches upon. Melody, Plato says, is made of word, harmony (melodic space) and rhythm; but when it comes to discriminating between good and bad melodies for his perfect Republic, he has Socrates play ignorant to provoke Glauco into making the distinctions. Then words and rhythm are no longer the issue and the discriminating element is purely musical: harmony.

Harmony (melodic space) seems to have most relevance in determining the character of a melody, and therefore is fundamental to the listener's perception of its meaning in the broadest sense. Another example: Michel Imberty, a French music scholar, talks about an experiment in which the same words were sung to different melodic lines and accompaniments, and the listeners asked to describe what they had understood. The descriptions differed and were consistently associated with musical distinctions; the listeners grasped the overall meaning of what they were listening to, mostly in relation to the musical characteristics, and with substantial disregard for the literal meaning.

With the second element, the melodic shape, I intend to indicate a series of actions that produce a specific flow of sounds. There is a very wide range of academic thinking about melodic shape: the musicological approach is more concerned with what we find in a written score - melodic shape in the strictest, most literal

sense - and later with the live act of playing or singing a melody - melodic shape as a series of actions. Trying to understand Maria Callas' "Casta diva" - or, more precisely, what we have access to: a recording of Maria Callas singing "Casta diva" - I could say, figuratively speaking, that most musicological literature offers a series of precise and accurate X-rays and CAT scans, but seldom provides a complete picture. Nevertheless, a lot can be learnt from the X-ray of a song or an aria, with its focus on the melodic shape in the strictest sense.

The idea of a similarity between a musical shape and vocal 'intonation' in speech has a very long history, most of which suggests that vocal intonation in speech - and the musical shape which resembles it - coincides with the shape of the emotions expressed. This means different things depending on the context.

In a Western or European context, different intonations for the same spoken word change the meaning: not the literal meaning, but the totality of implications behind the words. "Tonight" means tonight no matter how we make it sound; but is there a promise in the word tonight? Or a threat? The intonation tells us. Imberty's experiment is an example of a correspondence between vocal intonation in speech and the way we interpret a melodic shape.

Returning to melodic shape: in the wider sense of a series of actions that produce a specific flow of sounds, it is a set of pitches building specific links with one another. This space is not homogenous, but a system of tensions. Are these tensions set by habit and convention, or are at least some of them, 'natural', determined by the laws of physics? This question is impossible to answer. Certainly some of these tensions are set conventionally and others are rooted, as far as singing is concerned, in the



Maria Callas with Tullio Serafin. Photo: Levi

physiology of the voice.

Musicological analysis outlines tensions that are present in the score - whether written or implicit. It brings focus to specific aspects of extremely tangled and complex systems of relationship employed by musical styles or genres. It demonstrates the background, or backgrounds, against which a single melody may be understood. Nevertheless, it very often disregards elements that play an important role in the listener/spectator's perception, and that are not necessarily connected with specific genres or styles.

The clearest example is given by the vocal tension of a melodic movement: the movement in time and space that progressively builds the melody. Within melodic

space - a system of tensions - not all actions are the same: some will require a specific energy, others half or twice as much. The amount of energy required for a single vocal action depends on many factors: the measure of the space (the distance between two consecutive pitches; an interval of a second, a fifth or an octave); the position in the space (a fifth in the high vocal range is very different from a fifth in the lowest one); the speed of the action (how fast we jump from one pitch to the other); and the length of the action, its tempo and rhythm (the duration of each of the two pitches involved); the specific qualities of an individual voice.

Melodic shape happens concretely in time, with a certain rhythm and speed. The



Maria Callas recording. Photo: Erio Piccagliani

melodic flow's rhythm and speed are a powerful means with which to manipulate the perception of time in the listeners/spectators, and thus their perception of the meaning of what they are hearing.

Serafin said to Maria Callas: "Forget... that these are the rules, respect the rules but try to be free for a while... Speak it to yourself, and let's see with what phrasing, with what rhythm you come back to me tomorrow." Melodic space is not a space of freedom, but a space of constriction, where the performers have to build their free space within very strict boundaries. In our musical culture, the performers cannot modify the width of the melodic jump at all, but they can introduce their own subtle modifications to the speed of the overall flow, and to the speed of each fragment of the flow. Thus a specific rhythmic pattern is created, which never denies, but actually recreates the written one. The same could be said for the

dynamic pattern and for other features involved in the performance of an aria.

So Maria Callas' "Casta diva" (or the recorded performance of "Casta diva" by Maria Callas, conducted by Tullio Serafin, with a particular orchestra, theatre, and other singers involved) cannot be understood from the written score only; the written score is the basis ("you know the music perfectly well, Miss Callas"), but why her "Casta diva" touches us in a certain way has to do with the specific series of actions she has invented, the specific flow, the specific shape she produces at the end. Maria Callas had a very special, if not unique, ability to move in perfect balance over a very fine thread: she never simply conforms to the rhythmic pattern written in the score, and she never forgets or disregards that same pattern; the series of vocal actions she creates are at the same time entirely present in the score and completely

unimaginable from the score. In this respect her very great art relies especially on an extremely subtle way of avoiding what might be expected. She both conforms and opposes what musicology does. Fully aware of some specific aspects of very tangled and complex system of relationships implied by the musical style and genre she is working within, she manipulates the listeners by pushing their expectations towards the exact direction implied by the style and genre, and then at the last possible moment she creates a tiny action that sets her singing a little apart from the simpler action that she has led the listeners to expect.

In other words, she creates a multimedia relationship between the written score and her performance, as if they were two layers of one multi-layered object: she never parallels the score but creates instead a series of actions that perpetually interact with the score. And the core of this interaction is the intentional, constant unbalancing action that finally creates a different, unexpected balance.

And then, there is one more issue: voice.

Long before detecting specific choices of speed, rhythm, dynamics, etc., opera lovers know that the voice that is singing the "Ca..." of "Casta diva" is the voice of Maria Callas; but the same is true for lovers of French *chanson* and Edith Piaf, or Billie Holiday or Ella Fitzgerald for jazz lovers, or countless other performers, maybe known only within their small community. Individuals have their own vocal identity, which is unique, like fingerprints.

A trained voice, though, has a technique. Technique makes it possible to perform actions that 'natural', untrained voices would not be able to perform. It widens the range of possibilities: melodic and dynamic space, power, resistance, and colour. In this sense, technique expands

natural voice, but it also separates the trained voice from the everyday voice.

On the one hand, vocal technique allows the performers' voice to imitate more efficiently some elements of natural voice in speech or to express the emotion of a natural voice; on the other hand, vocal technique allows the performers to differentiate their voices dramatically from the emotional expressive quality that voice contains in all human experience.

We are certainly more familiar with aesthetics, and thus with techniques that declare openly that the aim of singing should be to reproduce a credible, similar expression of the emotions offered by the words (*recitar cantando*, in opera). But very many vocal techniques - probably the majority - around the world, aim to produce a voice that is other than human, a voice that may become, for instance, a material, concrete symbol of magic.

Singing may aim at enchantment, but in most cases it retains the almost inevitable closeness to everyday life, with the rhythm of everyday actions, and the tensions and colours of the everyday voice expressing emotion. When singing involves very refined techniques, as in opera singing, the performers have the ability to reproduce a credible emotional expression.

Voice can never forget its relationship with emotion; tensions - the tensions of the melodic space - become emotions. Tension here is not synonymous with stiffness or fatigue. On the contrary, all teachings of operatic vocal techniques (and of most instrumental techniques) insist upon the need to free the muscular apparatus from any unnecessary effort or tension; of letting the voice flow freely through a totally relaxed throat and mouth; of keeping the thorax fully relaxed, so that it can be filled with air that is exhaled smoothly, controlled by the only muscle

that must work, the diaphragm.

This is an artificial form of behaviour, very distant from a so-called natural voice. A very refined technique allows the performer not to reproduce a 'natural' voice, but to build a totally artificial vocal emission that the listener may perceive as the immediate expression of an emotion. And to create a carefully built 'unbalanced' balance, which may resemble the lack of balance spontaneously produced by certain emotions (rage, pain, fear, tenderness...); thus manipulating the listener's emotional balance.

In a way, expression is, intrinsically, an unbalancing event; etymologically, it comes from *ex-premere*, to push out. What comes out naturally does not need to be pushed. When we cry or scream, we push voice out with tensions that differ from one another and from the less tense way of using voice in quiet speech. When we scream or cry, we do not choose to change the tension of vocal emission; we change it automatically without being aware of the change.

Vocal technique can be thought as a 'reconstruction' of these automatisms: the creation of an artificial series of vocal actions that produces in the listeners a corresponding series of 'impressions' which may, depending on their cultural codes, become emotions and meanings. This process could be called reconstruction, imitation or manipulation of the listener's perception. The choice of description depends on aesthetic background.

Singing begins in this artificial space and develops in the space left in between the tension towards reconstruction, imitation, manipulation, and the intention to give up completely references to expression and emotion, in favour of a complete freedom of invention. Neither is ever fully achievable: all reconstruction implies invention of somewhat abstract elements;

and all invention will function - for the listener and, consciously or not, for the creator - as reconstruction as well.

Even in considering instrumental music, where the sound quality is by definition non-human, the most abstract composition may be perceived by the listener as evocative or expressive. But with voice, it is certainly impossible to erase its connection with our remotest and deepest emotional experience.

Technique is a powerful means of controlling and dominating this connection to avoid an automatic expression of emotions. It is impossible to neutralise completely the remote and deep experience shared by the performer and the listener.

But the perfect technique, good for every singer, does not exist, although there are certainly some basic principles of voice production that we can find almost everywhere: the way babies cry is very often taken as an example of the perfectly natural technique of voice expression. But then technique becomes a cultural fact, and a means to produce particular effects on a listener within a specific culture.

Singing may aim to produce in the listener the impression of a well-known, recognisable emotion or meaning, or the impression of something far from human; in any case, singing is in itself a very powerful tool for the manipulation of the listener's perception. Insofar as it shifts from spoken language, singing changes the listener's perception, moving it from the present, from reality, to a different time, an elsewhere, a world that differs from the one we know in our everyday life.

Singing does this, first of all, as music, which necessarily manipulates the listener's perception of time, because it mostly coincides with a melodic line, the tension of each vocal action, that literally tends to the next; and even more because singing uses



Maria Callas as Norma at La Scala, 1952.  
Photo: Erio Piccagliani

voice, with all the practical tensions connected with it - the tension of vocal chords, the tension of the diaphragm - that work on the listener's perception more empathically than any musical instrument could ever do. We all use voice, each of us has a personal experience of the changes in tension of our own voice in relation to specific emotions, when we scream or cry, etc.

The tension we recognise in the voice of the performer, no matter how artificially produced it may be, becomes, at least imaginatively, an inner personal tension of the listener, who somehow will 'move' with the performer. Singing becomes a materialisation of something immaterial, a presentation of something that is not there, not yet there, not there anymore, not possibly

there. Singing becomes the incarnation of absence. It materialises our desire, yearning, and imagination. It makes us forget the present in the name of past and future, whether real or imagined.

In our technological era, when we have the possibility of knowing very well the voice of a person we will never meet, the individual identity of that specific voice may become the catalyst for the instantaneous projection of the listener into the dimension of moving towards something. We are seduced, literally taken away, by the voice itself, by the simple act of singing, even before listening to the whole song.

But this specific voice is the result of a long line of actions, from the construction of a basic technique to the building of a specific series of actions that interact with the underlying melodic shape, with the meaning of the words, and with our natural or conventional habits of expressing emotions. Just like the series of actions that Maria Callas invented for "Casta diva" while walking up and down her apartment, reflecting on the words of the aria, on the character of Norma, speaking the words to herself, looking for her own nuances of rhythm, phrasing, dynamics, on the day of the audition.

The next day, Maria Callas came back and sang again for Tullio Serafin. "Very well, Miss Callas - he said - and now, just leave everything that you have learned at home there; now you have an instrument, play it."

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