

The Power to Transgress: Music across Borders - Introduction

For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.

(Jacques Attali, *Noise*)

When Edward Said wrote about music and its power to transgress, he was probably thinking about the role of music in Western societies, but also, in a more personal tone, about the way he used musical language in his own work.¹ As in the wider practice of cultural studies, here music plays both a marginal and a crucial role. On the one hand, music features as object of study in a limited number of books and essays, never taking the limelight off literature as the main field of analysis (this is only partially true of Said's last and unfinished work, *On Late Style*, the first where music and literature actually are side by side).² On the other, music features prominently in Said's work as a critical instrument, and one of his most famous insights, the concept of 'contrapuntal reading', comes straight out of Bach. More than a field in its own right, music in Said's writing is a tool for interpreting the world, where the word "interpret" takes on the performative nuance that music lends to it. To interpret the world is to shape it, to continuously reinvent it – a lesson Said took from Adorno: "to interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music".³

This issue of *Anglistica*, the first dedicated to music in the long commitment of this journal to cultural studies and interdisciplinarity, follows Said's ambivalent attitude without trying to solve it. Music, considered as a peculiar human activity whose medium is sound, features here first of all as a topic of study, an activity with multiple social and cultural resonances; it also works as an access point for issues such as diasporic identities, subaltern writing, and contrapuntal reading of hegemonic narratives. It is not my intention to summarize the broad question of what music actually is, let alone to overview the different meanings it assumes in different social and cultural contexts. Among these, Jacques Attali's definition of music as "the organization of noise" seems to me the most appropriate for the articles collected in this issue.⁴ Far from being self-referential and aloof from worldly concerns, the rules this "organization" follows are deeply ingrained in the power relations at work in the different times and places where music is produced, performed, and interpreted. Thus if Western classical music emerges, in Said's words, as "a remarkable

¹ See Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Vintage, 1991), 70.

² See Edward W. Said, *On Late Style. Music and Literature against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Music and Language: a Fragment", in *Quasi una fantasia. Essays on Modern Music*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 3.

⁴ Jacques Attali, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 4.

apparatus for producing and maintaining a discipline, protected by rituals of learning, traditions of pedagogy, display and so forth ... a police regime of the signifier”,⁵ popular music too is subjected to much the same ideological constraints, what Pierpaolo Martino calls “the imperatives of mainstream pop”.

On the other hand, cultural studies in particular has recognized a site of resistance in musical performance. Said famously wrote that “the transgressive element in music is its nomadic ability to attach itself to, and become a part of, social formations, to vary its articulations and rhetoric depending on the occasion as well as the audience, plus the power and the gender situations in which it takes place”.⁶ We may also mention Stuart Hall’s use of the expression “cut’n’mix”, borrowed from the musical milieu of the 70s, to describe “the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization ... in short, the process of cultural *diaspora-ization*”, in his pivotal 1989 essay on “new ethnicities”, reprinted in the first issue of *Anglistica* New Series.⁷ More generally, music has been identified as a language where the voice of the subaltern can resonate, albeit in attenuated and hybridized forms: as Iain Chambers writes, “music sustains an ethical resonance that permits us not so much to fully capture and comprehend the past as to recover fragments of its dispersed body ... a re-membering that directs us elsewhere”.⁸

“Voicings: Music across Borders” follows this tradition in cultural studies, as our title already indicates: all the essays included in this issue focus on the ability of a given genre, artist or performance to give voice to marginal or eccentric subjects who live and elaborate the world ‘across borders’ – state borders as well as less tangible borders between metropolis and periphery, power and resistance, hegemony and subalternity. The voice, itself a staple metaphor in postcolonial and cultural studies, is meant both as intrinsically singular and as something that is open to dialogue, bearer of discourse but also resistant to it: as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write, “[a] voice ... is not exactly congruent with a discourse, for while discourse is institutional, transpersonal, unauthored, voice is personalized, having authorial accent and intonation, and constitutes a specific interplay of discourses (whether individual or communal)”.⁹

Voicing is also a technical term defining the construction of intervals in a musical chord. Musical intervals, as Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us, “constitute interruptions and irruptions in a uniform series of surface; they designate a temporal hiatus, an intermission, ... and they are what comes up at the threshold of representation”.¹⁰ Hence, ‘voicings’ refers not only to the act of giving voice, but also to a series of “interruptions”, an interplay of different critical voices which, while interpreting different works and contexts, yet create a harmonic ensemble where each emerges as both strongly individual and in consort with the rest.

⁵ Said, *Musical Elaborations*, 56.

⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁷ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” (1989), *Anglistica* 1.1-2 (1997), 22.

⁸ Iain Chambers, *Culture after Humanism. History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 119.

⁹ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 215.

¹⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Beware of Wolf Intervals”, in *Cinema Interval* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), xii-xiii.

A significant issue of contrapuntal reading can be found in our first contribution, which presents Susan McClary's reading of Frescobaldi's *Maddalena alla croce* (1630) in the context of Mediterranean cultural exchanges. I do not think it is an exaggeration to state that McClary's work has changed the way music, especially Western classical music, is studied today: starting from her seminal *Feminine Endings*, her research on the interplay between music and gender issues has started what is today a flourishing school known as New Musicology.¹¹ As she writes in the essay published here, this school "has often been vilified as a reaction from those who want to foist their special interests in women or queers or pop music on the previously uncontested canon": from the start new musicology has worked to undo borders, among them the one between classical and popular music. *Feminine Endings*, for example, puts together Bizet's *Carmen* and pop star Madonna to explore the gender issues at stake in musical performance.

¹¹ See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings. Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Oxford, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Gender has since become a popular topic in new musicology: yet, as McClary herself wrote in a later reflection on her early efforts, "it had seemed when I was writing *Feminine Endings* that the (to me) self-evident representations of gender and eroticism I was tracing would reveal the complicity of these basic formal principles in a variety of culturally specific agendas, thus enabling a thorough historical reassessment of these elements".¹² The essay presented in this issue follows this effort to provide a historical reassessment of the classical music canon, highlighting the emergence in Frescobaldi's work of the cultural and musical traffics that, together with the economic ones, make up the history of the Mediterranean area – an element too often forgotten by contemporary immigration policies in Italy and the other Mediterranean countries that share the Italian effort to silence this shared history.

¹² Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: the Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000), ix-x.

It is because of this peculiar relevance to contemporary debates that McClary's essay is offered both in English and in Italian translation. It is also because her work, together with that of the new musicology school, has yet to receive due attention in Italy. When we started to plan this issue, none of McClary's work had been translated into Italian, and her major publications remain to date untranslated.¹³ Italy has emerged as a major concern in our work, so much so that a whole section of the issue is dedicated to representations of Italian identity. Both Richard Dyer's and Alessandro Buffa's contributions focus on Italianness as a contested site of identity, whose construction involves the contrapuntal interaction of different stories and interpretations.

¹³ In the meantime, a translation of her book on *Carmen*, originally in the Cambridge Opera Handbooks series, has been published: see *Georges Bizet. Carmen*, ed. by Annamaria Cecconi (Milano: Rugginenti, 2008); English ed. *Georges Bizet. Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

The privileged context of the USA, where Italian migration has found one of its privileged outputs, sees both the struggle by Italian composer Nino Rota across the borders of the Italian and US film industries, and the similar struggle of young, second generation Italian migrants to voice

their diasporic identity through the appropriation of doo-wop music in post-war New York. Here music emerges as a way to voice resistance to hegemonic national discourses, embodying the “slippage of category” Homi K. Bhabha finds in the act of writing the nation:¹⁴ the ethnicization of Italian identity, which emerges particularly from Buffa’s description of the contamination between Italian American and African American music, offers a strong counterpoint to current discourses on Italy as a ‘white’, European nation. Here music, following Said’s insight, works both as field of study and critical instrument; musical analysis – as in Richard Dyer’s article – serves to deconstruct the border between imitation and originality, thereby foregrounding a radical reassessment of the possibility to represent, in music or elsewhere, an ‘original’ Italian identity.

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 140.

The strategies of resistance that can find a voice in the fractures and fissures of hegemonic discourses are at the centre of the last section of this issue, which stands across the border between metropolitan and postcolonial spaces. Placing his discourse at the centre of the former colonial UK, Pierpaolo Martino describes the way an apparently hegemonic discourse can be transformed into a counter-discourse ‘from the inside’: thus rock band Radiohead makes use of the structures offered by the musical establishment to interpellate its audience differently, prompting it to take responsibility for its own part in the system and to become aware of its power to change it. Moving to the former colonies, namely Australia, Katherine E. Russo identifies the same unsettling power of musical performance in the work of Romaine Moreton, whose “transmedia storytelling” reappropriates recording technology and the ‘Aboriginal’ musical practices which had already been marketed to the West (as in the notorious imagery of Chatwin’s *Songlines*), what Russo calls the “commodification of Indigenous orality”.

Voicing, as I mentioned earlier, implies the interaction of voices – an interaction explicitly sought for in the section titled “Dialogue/Debate/Dissent”. *Anglistica* has traditionally devoted this section to interviews and discussions that cut across the border between the academic and the personal. The two pieces hosted in this section bear witness to the variety of forms these “dialogues” can take: Iain Chambers’s interview with Danilo Capasso sees a distinction between the two speakers, the interviewer and the interviewee, signalled by different headings, leaving the reader with the task of spotting the echoes between the participants’ voices. On the other hand, Fiorenzo Iuliano’s encounter with Wayne Koestenbaum has taken a more fluid, contrapuntal form, an atypical interview that follows “the alternating and interfering rhythm of our questions and answers”, as Iuliano writes in his introductory note; here, interviewer and interviewee often change place with each other and create a flux into which the reader cannot avoid being drawn.

¹⁵ See Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (London: Penguin, 1994).

Both interviews bear witness to two encounters: Capasso's interview came to light almost by chance, as stated in the editorial note by Marina Vitale. Naples, the place where most of us work and live, emerges here as a contested space where different musical and performative practices coexist and interrogate one another; but it is also part of an international network of artists and locations with which a fruitful dialogue can be enlaced. The other interview records a triple encounter. Several years ago, while I was working on my PhD dissertation, I came across Wayne Koestenbaum's book on opera, *The Queen's Throat*, which was to become a major inspiration for my work, writing, and life.¹⁵ A few years later I contacted Koestenbaum for this issue and as Fiorenzo Iuliano, my colleague, friend and sometimes accomplice in academic mischief, happened to be in New York at the time, I put them in touch with each other. One of the results of this encounter, the interview, is presented here; another, the first Italian translation of Koestenbaum's work, will be published by Iuliano in the next issue of *Anglistica*. Here, Koestenbaum's queer interpretation of opera, which stems out of the 'opera queen' culture, will take us elsewhere, across the borders of gender studies to a radical reassessment of identity politics and academic writing.

As Said may have helped us anticipate, our topic but also our efforts and the contributors' enthusiasm and expertise have transgressed their allotted borders and spilled over the constraints of a single issue. Unable to reject contributions that are part of an ongoing dialogue between many disciplines, and without ever aspiring to completeness in covering the field of music studies, we decided to plan a second instalment, under the working title of "Music and the Performance of Identity". This second issue will include, together with Koestenbaum's contribution, others that necessarily engage in a dialogue with those included here: among them, a review of contemporary musical experimentations in digital art by Vito Campanelli, founder of MAO (Media & Arts Office), with whom Danilo Capasso has recently collaborated; a variation on the theme of voicing identities in a queer perspective by Freya Jarman-Ives; an essay by Patrizia Calefato on the postcolonial experience expressed through the interplay between fashion and music; an account of the aural and written provocations of Caribbean poet Jean 'Binta' Breeze, by Manuela Coppola; and a joint venture by Raffaella Bianchi and Bezen Balamir Coskun on the different meanings opera takes up in relation to national discourses in both Italy and Turkey, a follow-up to the Mediterranean suggestions offered by Susan McClary in her article in the present issue.

On a closing note, I need to thank the Editorial Board and especially the editor of the journal, Jane Wilkinson, whose 'feel' for music is even stronger than mine, and who has helped us through the sometimes hard process of making this issue come to life. I also need to thank my co-

editor Marina Vitale, with whom I also share an intellectual commitment to music, who shared the burden of editing this issue and agreed to co-edit the next issue on music as well; and finally Marta Cariello and Katherine E. Russo, whose care in helping out with the language editing cannot be overstated. This has been a truly collective project, which has not aimed at consonance, but at a fruitful counterpoint among voices and experiences; to quote Iain Chambers one last time, “we could consider music as one of the languages we inhabit, dwell in, and in which we, our histories, cultures, and identities, are constituted. As a language it is seemingly immaterial and yet profoundly terrestrial At this point to ask what music is, is to ask what our culture is, who we are, and what are we doing here?”¹⁶

¹⁶ Chambers, *Culture after Humanism*, 115.