

Interpreting Music, Interpreting Identity
Coda

[I]t is culture in general, and music in particular,
that provide an alternative model for the conflict of
identities.

(Edward W. Said, *The Ramallah Concert*)

In a recent work co-authored with Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler mentions the singing of the US anthem in Spanish by illegal residents in California as posing a question of property (as well as propriety): “to whom does this anthem belong?”¹ While the Bush administration claimed that the anthem could only be sung in English, its ‘mother-tongue’, the migrants’ gesture claimed the national tune as their own. At the same time, it made the anthem itself sound foreign, different from the sound singers and listeners have been used to hum and sing along to. The migrants’ performance (for such it may be termed) works to create and express a community, one however that has no recognition in public, national discourse: the very possibility to sing the national anthem in an-other language opens up national identity to a plurality of voices. As Butler writes, “the ‘we’ to sing and to be asserted in Spanish surely does something to our notions of the nation and to our notions of equality. It’s not just that many people sang together ... but also that singing is a plural act, an articulation of plurality”.²

¹ Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 58.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

The episode quoted by Butler may easily be put alongside the many performances included in both *Voicings: Music across Borders* and *Music and the Performance of Identity*. On the one hand, illegal residents who have crossed the border between the US and Mexico sing the national anthem in Spanish, thus performing it, as it were, *across the border* between the US tune and the Spanish language. On the other, by bringing together the language of their country of origin and the national tune of their adopted, would-be homeland, the singers *perform an identity* that is neither the one nor the other, but calls for a miscegenation, an identity that is not unitary but plural, and in this plurality finds its foundation. In both these aspects, the suppleness of musical performance – which allows the tune to be recognizable and at the same time foreign because of the language in which it is sung – comes to the fore as a privileged *locus* of utterance for the very “articulation of plurality” Butler vindicates.

The question Butler and Spivak pose in their discussion of contemporary forms of citizenship and the nation-state is whether this subversive act of appropriation of one of the most charged national signifiers – the anthem

– may point to a different elaboration of identity, which comes about neither as a psychoanalytic process nor as a consequence of the power networks in which each human being is always and inevitably entangled.³ On the contrary, the subject that “sings the nation-state”, as the title of the book goes, is in every way a performative subject, whose gesture of appropriation, of repetition-with-variation of the US national anthem marks her/his location as a migrant subject, a subject (quite literally) across borders. Butler calls this a “speech act”, and pairs it with other similar acts – such as the migrants’ slogan “*somos iguales*”, we are equal; yet, I would like to focus on the fact that the Butler-Spivak subject here does not speak, but *sings* the nation-state. The use of a musical performance, although not expanded on by the authors, highlights many of the concerns shared by music and cultural studies, from the idea of performance as continuous appropriation to the question of a ‘musical subject’. These questions find an echo in the two issues of *Anglistica* on music that are now drawing to a close, and I would like to return to them here, offering them as alternative routes of fruition of the volumes themselves, as well as starting points to further musical journeys.

One of the privileged paths for this further journey, as I have already suggested in the Introduction to *Voicings*, is the work of Edward Said. In his acceptance speech for the Prince of Asturias Prize for Understanding between the Peoples, in June 2002, he declared that “it is culture in general, and music in particular, that provide an alternative model for the conflict of identities”;⁴ a statement that could have easily worked as *exergo* for any of the essays included in these issues. From Susan McClary’s Magdalene, weaving together Catholicism and Sufism across the rough waters of the Mediterranean, to Wayne Koestenbaum’s closeted homosexual finding a voice in operatic performance – just to mention the articles which open the first and second issue respectively – all the contributions form a contrapuntal ensemble featuring different voices working in consort despite their apparent foreignness to one another. Each and every essay offers music as an alternative model for the elaboration of identity and as a critical tool to question accepted notions of gender and cultural identity in the West.

Said was granted the Prince of Asturias Prize for his work, together with Daniel Barenboim, on the West-Eastern Divan project: an orchestra made up of young musicians from Israel and other Middle-Eastern countries – including Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, and the Occupied Territories – whose effort to act as ambassadors for the peace process in the Middle East continues to this day. The West-Eastern Divan, a “microcosm of a society that has never existed and may well never exist” as Elena Cheah defines it in her book on the subject, was founded in Weimar in 1999, as an effort to bring together performers of classical music from different countries in

³ Here Butler in particular rejects (as already elsewhere) Agamben’s notion of “bare life”, asserting that “no one is ever returned to bare life ... because there are a set of powers that produce and maintain this situation of destitution, dispossession, and displacement” (ibid., 10). See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 67.

⁴ Said’s acceptance speech is included in the DVD dedicated to the West-Eastern Divan, *The Ramallah Concert / Knowledge Is the Beginning* (Warner Classics, 2006).

⁵ Elena Cheah, *An Orchestra Beyond Borders. Voices of the West-Eastern Divan* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 1.

the Middle East and make them play together in a regular Western orchestra ensemble.⁵ The orchestra, originally started as a one-week workshop, has recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, playing in the most renowned locations in Europe and the US as well as Ramallah, where a memorial concert for Edward Said was held in 2005.

Although the orchestra sticks to a strictly Western classical repertoire of composers such as Beethoven or Mozart, its performances nevertheless do not rely on the tradition of classical music as hegemonic discourse on the cultural superiority of the West. On the contrary, in a vein reminiscent of Said's own use of counterpoint in *Culture and Imperialism*, Barenboim writes:

Edward Said and I believed in letting opposing voices be heard at the same time We based this principle on musical counterpoint, where a subversive accompanimental voice can enhance a melody rather than detract from it. To this day, we do not try to diminish or soften our differences in the orchestra: we do the opposite. By confronting our differences, we attempt to understand the logic behind the opposite position.⁶

⁶ Ibid., viii.

To Said, counterpoint is a critical instrument that made it possible to confront the formation of cultural identities “understood not as essentializations ... but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions”.⁷ The West-Eastern Divan puts Said's predicament into musical practice by performing the Western classical archive against its grain, opening up previously secluded spaces such as the concert hall to the silenced voices of history.

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 52.

Experiences such as this not only prove music to be a plural, performative mode of identity construction; they also identify music – whatever its kind or genre – as a potential counter-discursive experience. Butler asks whether the US anthem sung in Spanish is just the expression of “a suspect nationalism, or [whether it] actually fracture[s] the ‘we’ in such a way that no single nationalism could take hold on the basis of that fracture”.⁸ All the contributions to these two issues of *Anglistica* explore the fractures and shadow lines musical experience creates in the ‘we’ who perform as well as in the ‘we’ who listen. Hence even the mainstream musical culture explored (in different ways) by Patrizia Calefato and Pierpaolo Martino can emerge as a site of difference, as performances across the borders showing the fissures and fractures of cultural hegemony, alongside more ‘canonical’ counterdiscursive performances such as Romaine Moreton's and Shirley Thompson's as interpreted by Katherine E. Russo and Manuela Coppola.

⁸ Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, 61.

These articles are to be read as part of a fruitful dialogue among different scholarships. Marina Vitale's and my own effort, in putting together the two issues as they are now presented to our readers, has been to devise

them in order to make apparent the many connections that can be woven among the different essays. The criteria shaping the different sections have not striven to achieve conformity of genre, historical period, or disciplinary affiliation. We have tried to highlight ‘themes’ such as musical resistance, queer theory, or the relationship between music and media; necessarily, some keys have overshadowed others. Yet – thanks also to the flexibility of the online format – other connections among the essays can easily be spotted. Postcolonial musical experiences are at the heart of both Coppola and Russo’s articles, as well as of McClary’s reading of the Mediterranean as postcolonial sea in colonial times. Vito Campanelli’s survey of contemporary musical experimentations in digital arts traces a parallel route to Iain Chambers’s conversation with Danilo Capasso about his musical practices; while the queerness of operatic imagery explored by Koestenbaum (both in the interview that closes *Voicings* and in the chapter from his work included here) finds an embodiment in Ernesto Tomasini’s art.

Yet there may also be other, less explicit, themes: a constant engagement with the construction of ‘Italianness’ through musical practices, informed again by postcolonial and cultural studies, may be found both in the foreign voices introduced by Raffaella Bianchi and Bezen Balamir Coskun in the national imagery elaborated through opera in Italy and Turkey, as well as in Alessandro Buffa’s article about other, less expected, Italian musical expressions such as doo-wop. Buffa identifies a category of musical ‘users’ and agents, youngsters, who are at the centre too of Calefato’s article, which also confronts dynamics of appropriations – such as “surfin’ stiles” – that recall Richard Dyer’s reflections on plagiarism and pastiche. Calefato’s work also highlights dynamics of identification between music performers and their public, expanded upon by Freya Jarman-Ives’ analysis of the role of vocal identification in the elaboration of modern subjectivities; while Tomasini’s engagement with ‘angels’ may even be said to look back to the counter-discursive forms of Catholicism described by McClary.

These are only a few of the routes the reader can trace across *Voicings: Music across Borders* and *Music and the Performance of Identity*. Others can be taken by accessing the issues via the Multimedia sections of the website, where, together with illustrations from the essays, videos and audio files can be found: and we here thank Danilo Capasso, André and Michel Décosterd (via Vito Campanelli), Romaine Moreton, Shirley Thompson, and Ernesto Tomasini (with Othon Mataragas and Fabrizio Modenese Palumbo), who have offered their work to be published on the website. We also thank Wayne Koestenbaum and Da Capo Press for permitting us to publish and translate chapter 5 from *The Queen’s Throat*, thereby enabling us to offer the work of this magnificent writer and critic for the first time in Italian; as well as all those who have made this effort

possible. In this very difficult time for Italian universities and research, approaching the closure of a project like this one feels like a feat in itself; it also summons a vague reverberation of hope for future work and fertile dialogues to come.