

**Essay title:** Discuss the context within composers explore the hitherland between song and speech.

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To begin with, one must first discuss the importance of the voice in the world of music. Musical instruments were created as an extension of the human body in terms of expression. The voice, along with percussion instruments, can easily be assumed to be the most fundamental instrument in music all over the world, because these are natural sounds that have been available to humanity since its beginning. Analytically speaking, the interesting elements of the human voice are that it varies significantly among people though it retains a similar timbre. The human mouth is capable of producing an amount of articulated sounds which cannot be found in any other instruments. The voice is an instrument all composers have written for. One reason for that is that voice also conveys meaning through language. Thus, when a composer writes a song, he can express what he wants to express both via his music and the lyrics of the song or piece he is writing.

A very characteristic composition of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century exploring a particular aspect of the voice is Schoenberg's *Dreimal sieben Gedichte aus Albert Girauds 'Pierrot lunaire'*, Op.21 (Three times seven Poems from Albert Giraud's 'Pierrot lunaire'), or as it is commonly referred to, *Pierrot Lunaire*. Pierrot is an atonal piece which was commissioned by an actress at a cabaret, and in which Schoenberg has set 21 poems by Albert Giraud, as the title indicates.

In this piece, Schoenberg makes use of what he calls *sprechstimme* (German for “spoken-voice”), which is basically something between singing and speaking. He says that the singer in Pierrot sings a note but then “immediately abandons it by falling or rising. The goal is certainly not at all a realistic, natural speech. On the contrary, the difference between ordinary speech and speech that collaborates in a musical form must be made plain”<sup>1</sup>. By using *sprechstimme*, Schoenberg achieves a very unique way of expression in *Pierrot Lunaire*, which makes it a very important composition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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1 Schoenberg, Arnold. *Verklärte Nacht and Pierrot Lunaire* (Dover Publications. New York, 1994), p. 54

Schoenberg himself wrote in his journal: "I think I am approaching a new kind of expression. The sounds become an almost too animal and immediate expression of sensual and spiritual emotion."<sup>2</sup> Schoenberg, with *sprechstimme*, found the intermediate between singing and speaking, although he did not imply that this is how songs should be composed from now on; he didn't think that this is the next step on the path of song composition, he rather created a sidetrack which opened new doors to writing for voice. However, this approach to voice was not accepted by many critics and members of the public at the time, although now most people truly admire *Pierrot Lunaire* and it is considered the composition after which music changes dramatically. According to Allen Shawn, "*Pierrot Lunaire* left a beam of moonlight on the shoulder of twentieth-century music that could not be brushed off."<sup>3</sup>

Another piece which explores some aspects of the voice, though in a completely different way than Schoenberg, is Stockhausen with his serial composition *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1954/55). In this piece, Stockhausen tries to explore the hitherland between voice and electronic sounds, and of meaning and pure sound. He recorded the voice of a small boy and then he created electronic sounds that sounded like the human voice, so he tries to make the human voice sound like electronic sounds and the electronic sounds he created sound like human. This creates a kind of grey area between the voice and the electronic sounds and the composer explores that in the piece. Also, by cutting and mixing different parts of the tapes with the recorded voice of the boy, he re-combines some syllables from the original text to create new words (such as "Schneewind, Eisglut, Feuerreif etc"<sup>4</sup>) and also gives different meaning to the already existing words by changing their order. Stockhausen, having studied phonetics with Meyer-Keppler, knew how unique

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<sup>2</sup> Shawn, Allen. *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.155

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey, Jonathan. *The music of Stockhausen: an introduction* (Faber and Faber Ltd. London, 1975), p.78

the human voice is, and that imitating it exactly with electronic sounds is impossible. He wrote "Sung speech-sounds are in certain structural aspects much more differentiated than any sounds yet composed electronically"<sup>5</sup>. Stockhausen analysed the voice's frequencies and he composed the rest of the piece with durations and pitches derived from the boy's voice frequencies, in a serial way. Thus what Stockhausen was aiming at was a total control of the sound of the voice and of electronic sounds similar to that of the voice in an attempt to explore the in-between the voice and pure electronic sounds (sine waves etc).

A more recent composition which uses the human voice in music is minimalist Steve Reich's *Different Trains* for tape and string quartet. In this piece, Reich has interviewed different people talking about trains and he finds musical patterns in their speech which he uses in the piece. The musical patterns are played by the strings while the particular phrase of the recorded interview is played sporadically, and by repeating these musical elements which exist in speech (although we don't consciously notice it every time we hear someone talk) he makes us notice that there is actually music in speech.

Therefore, Reich's approach to the voice is completely different than Stockhausen's or Schoenberg's, as he does not attempt to explore the voice on its own, but he tries to "extract" music from speech. In his previous compositions, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come out* he treats the voice in a similar way but without the instruments. In *It's Gonna Rain* he has the recording playing in two tapes which slowly go out of phase, then are synchronised again, with that phase technique being central to the whole piece. In an interview with Jason Gross he said that "the speech-melody is everything. It [...] generates all kinds of variations upon itself melodically and on the meaning of the words."<sup>6</sup> Specifically for *It's Gonna Rain*, where he uses the voice of a black preacher, he says that "sometimes it's hard to say whether they're singing or speaking. They're exactly in the cusp between

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<sup>5</sup> Stockhausen, Karlheinz. *Stockhausen: Gesamtaufgabe*, CD3 "Elektronische Musik 1952-1960" (1992)

<sup>6</sup> Gross, Jason. Interview blabla <http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/reich.html> ?

speech and song. It's a very mannered kind of speaking. It's almost chanting.”<sup>7</sup>

The last composition that is mentioned in this essay is Jonathan Harvey's *Mortuos Plango*. *Mortuos Plango* was composed in 1980 using recordings of his son's voice singing in the cathedral his son was a chorister in, and the sound of the largest bell of the cathedral. He then synthesized sounds similar to the sounds he had recorded and controlled and mixed all the different sounds together in a composition.

In the booklet of a CD including *Mortuos Plango* he wrote that the electronic sounds he created, “being purely digital creations, could be internally transformed to an amazing degree, one could, for instance move seamlessly from a vowel sung by the boy to the complex bell spectrum consisting of 33 partials.”<sup>8</sup> Harvey explored the sound of the voice and the sound of that large bell with the many partials, and as Harvey is a spectral composer he is interested in the specific values of the frequencies of each sound. He goes on to explain that “the entire pitch structure is based on these partials with their curious, haunting intervals: the harmonies are selected from them, and one transposed selection glissandos to another.” Although at first Harvey's piece looks to treat the voice in a similar way to Stockhausen's, it doesn't. Harvey, being a spectral composer, bases the rest of the composition on the large amount of partials of the bell, and he distinguishes between each section with a different sound of the bell<sup>9</sup>, while Stockhausen aims at a total control of the electronic sounds and the recorded human voice.

To sum up, we have seen how after Pierrot Lunaire the treatment of the voice as an instrument has changed and many different approaches to the voice have been taken. We also witnessed how the voice has inspired diametrically different composers such as Stockhausen and Reich, or Harvey and Schoenberg, and how each one of them used the

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7 Ibid.

8 Harvey, Jonathan. *Tombeau de Messiaen, Mortuos Plango, 4 Images After Yeats, Ritual Melodies*, Sargasso (1999)

9 Ibid

voice in a different way. However, this is not to say that these are the only ways a composer can use the voice in music. Luciano Berio's *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Rihm's *Mit Geschloesen Mund*, Glenn Gould's *The North* and Charles Dodge's *Speech Images* are but a few examples where the voice has been used and explored in different ways. It is only certain that the instrument for which composers will never cease to write is the voice, albeit it is unsure how the composers in the future will exploit the voice and its capabilities.