

VOCALIZING / VOICING

In oral communication, vocalizing means expressing an idea or feeling with words, while voicing points especially to expressing anger or protest. In music, vocalizing means using the voice to make a specific sound, while in organology, voicing means fine-tuning timbre, attack, loudness etc. of each individual string or pipe of an instrument.

Roland Barthes distinguishes the formally-musically perfect, but in a certain sense lifeless pheno-song from geno-song, which allows the voice to grow “out of language and its materiality” from the “space in which the meanings germinate” (Barthes 1982, 272). For Norie Neumark, a central element of the voice is its ability to transcend the boundaries of the subject and connect subjects. “Alterity” is the reason why we listen to other voices: because the voice conveys the fundamental and perceptible uniqueness of the person vocalizing.

Sources: Barthes, Roland: Die Rauheit der Stimme, in: id.: Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn, Frankfurt a.M. 1982, 269 – 278. Neumark, Norie et al. (ed.): Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media, London 2010. Translation by the author.

→: Performance “Nocturne Ritual” by Alessandra Eramo, Errant Sound @ Rungestraße, 11. 2. 2024. Photo: Golo Föllmer.



ALESSANDRA ERAMO: As a young woman, I dealt with my body on stage. I had also trained in bel canto, classical singing, but at a certain point I broke with this tradition. I didn't want to be the pretty singer with make-up applied on the stage. Sometimes I thought I would put on a hood and just disappear. My voice would remain.

Later, I thought about how I could overcome these clichés of the singer. Singing in public is like a political act for me. That's why I'm interested in my voice in its many forms and as an expression of freedom. I try to explore the hidden acoustic territories of the human voice with extended vocal techniques.

I am fascinated by the fact that the voice contains very different emotions as well as physical tensions and always musicality. My performances are mostly composed pieces where trance states also play a role. I have often observed how trance arises in my body.

I am thinking of the conceptual proximity of evocation and invocation. Evocation refers to the fact that I can evoke states with my voice, in myself and in others. Invocation is the summoning of spiritual beings, a kind of magical activity in which performers “call into” their own bodies or thoughts.

My work has to do with suggestion and memory. I look for something that is present as a sound idea or memory and I bring it out. For me, this process is connected to the power of the repetition of prayers or chants, as I could hear them during my childhood in Basilicata and Apulia at funerals or other magical-religious rituals. Women would recite the rosary for hours until the words dissolved and became meaningless, and while invoking a saint or a Madonna, the women would create a kind of drone-music concert with an immersive experience of the sound of the voice.

In my solo live performances for voice and often also for electronic instruments, there is always a situation of exchange between the audience and me, something is taken, something is given. I speak, I sing during a concert or in public, and my voice suddenly acts like a body that moves from me to the ears and memory of other people. It is there, at this point, that the exchange takes place. The room also plays an important role in this. I am in dialog with it and always adapt to certain spatial situations. That's why my work tries to be site-specific. I really like it when the audience is close to me. It's like a ritual where the audience almost shares the smells with me.

A good two years ago, still during the pandemic, I realized the performance work “La Santa Monica.” The title refers to an old Apulian divination ritual that combines elements of paganism and Christianity in an in-

teresting way, a sound ritual that my great-grandmother performed. Women met on a terrace at midnight for this. After praying to St. Monica, they listened into the stillness of the night to the sounds sent by the saint: the cry of an owl, the whistle of a train, the barking of a dog, footsteps or the voice of a man. Each of these acoustic signs had a symbolic meaning for the women, which they then interpreted. I find it fascinating how these women worked creatively and imaginatively with sound, trying to understand their own reality and finding answers to their questions and problems through an oracle. For my performance “La Santa Monica,” I created a new sound performance for which I combined field recordings from our current reality – which I recorded from my balcony in Berlin and also during my stay in Puglia – with text, drawings, a sound object made of salt and contact microphones, and composed a song to create a deep collective listening experience together with the audience.

I associate “voicing” with a voice that is conspicuous, that goes outwards and demands attention, here and now. I therefore perceive voicing as strongly political, as an expression of an acute need for visibility/audibility. At the same time, it stands for impulsive behavior. I identify more strongly with the term vocalizing. It contains the focus on structure, on a creative process that takes time and is not as impulsive as voicing. I understand vocalizing as more highly structured, a voice that refers to a solid base that already exists within us, like a sediment of materials, images, memories that are the foundation of our being.

I love the idea that the voice is alive. The voice can of course be trained to achieve a certain virtuosity, a certain sound and a certain color. But there is always a shadow behind it. And I am particularly interested in this shadow, precisely because we cannot create it through training and virtuosity. I can observe my hand, but only others can see my back. I need a mirror for that. It's similar with my voice. In this image, the mysteriousness of the voice becomes evident to me.