The Naked Voice: Music for Solo Voice

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Abstract: Unaccompanied singing dates back thousands of years, yet solo voice onstage today is still relatively uncommon in our Western musical world. The singer alone seems exposed and vulnerable, unsupported by the usual instrumental accompaniment; but in spite of—because of—this vulnerability, solo voice can create an intense and powerful means of musical expression. Much of the existing repertoire for solo voice overlaps with theatre work, as the singer alone will inevitably explore character presentation and development, through music and text. This short paper discusses some important repertoire in the solo voice genre and introduces new Canadian works.

What could be more everyday than singing? The act of singing is a natural physical activity with obvious close ties to speech. Of course, this function is one of our most important means of communication and a regular activity for the majority of people. Singing takes place, not only as a highly developed art, but also as a mundane activity: it may occur in situations such as while showering, while driving, when putting children to bed, and in many other quotidian activities. Singing alone is a normal and natural activity in these circumstances.

Yet singing alone is a rarity in concert programs and onstage in musical theatre or opera, despite the strong tradition of unaccompanied singing that dates back thousands of years in folk music, religious chant and other musical forms. Perhaps this is because the singer alone, onstage, is exposed and potentially vulnerable. Any perceived vocal error, in technique or text, is clearly audible. There is no support—neither the moral support of an onstage companion, nor the musical support of accompanying sound—from any instrument at all.

This paper seeks to explore the strengths and dramatic implications of “the naked voice”—the singer alone, onstage. This form of repertoire presents the voice in all its strengths and weaknesses. Links are evident to one of the themes of the *Lyric Canada* conference, “the reinvention of lyric

theatre in twenty-first century explorations of the sung text”: How do composers work with text? How can the composer and the singer venture beyond text? What structural and musical possibilities exist within what may seem to be a very limited genre? How can a singer alone create dramatic tension onstage? What sounds are possible if we allow ourselves to explore beyond the limitations of standard concepts of beauty in singing? Exposing the naked voice in these ways presents extended possibilities for all performers who use the voice, and to those who teach voice.

The wide variety of musical genres common to Western music includes the rather unsatisfactorily named “classical” (with all its variants and connotations), music theatre and popular music. Almost all vocal music in these genres has an accompaniment of one kind or another. Of course, there are exceptions in related genres, the most obvious likely being the vast and varied folk song repertoire. Songs in this category include a wide range of styles, from lilting Irish tunes to moving African-American spirituals; these songs can be performed with or without accompaniment. However, most vocal music in the “classical” repertoire has a piano accompaniment or a reduction of the orchestral or band score arranged for piano; some vocal music can be classified as chamber music because it includes several instruments working with the voice.

Singing with instruments, even one, very obviously adds colour, range and diversity to any musical performance. In lyric theatre, including music theatre, opera and other variants, the singer most often interacts with other singing characters onstage, adding dimensions of dialogue, dramatic action and character to round out the scenes in addition to the opportunities for musical interaction between singer(s) and instrument(s). A solo/monologue may well occur, but again it is rare to find a solo scene without benefit of support from other characters or accompanying instruments.

So why write, or perform, music for solo voice? I believe that the naked voice allows for great lyric expression – unadulterated, straightforward human expression. Nakedness implies vulnerability, but it can also imply strength, and independence. The naked voice allows for lyric beauty and a very strong communicative link between performer and audience. The voice alone exposes its beauty as well as its cracks and flaws, creating a powerful, visceral musical experience.

As an integral part of lyric expression, especially through the human body and the human voice, text becomes of paramount importance. In all vocal music, but perhaps most tellingly in the solo vocal repertoire, text can be clearly heard. Examples of the importance of text in classically-based solo vocal music may be found in the songs of British composer Michael Head, dating from the early to mid-twentieth century. Head’s songs emphasize text above all, with rhythms and pitches

serving to highlight the words. A fine example is his song “The Singer”, which is carefully notated to follow natural speech patterns in the unaccompanied vocal line.

But more experimental composers have gone further with text, breaking it down to play with the individual phonemes and sounds within the words, adding further sonic possibilities. Even the very basis of singing, the natural rhythm of breathing, can become a powerfully expressive element in a solo vocal work. (Examples of these possibilities, by Canadian composers, will be discussed later in this article.) Again the connections with lyric theatre emerge. Just as in a dramatic monologue, there is something very intense and compelling about a solo vocal performance: all attention is focused on the performance of one individual. Most specifically, the more experimental solo vocal works embody this intensity. Stripped of tonality, venturing into less easily accessible sonic territory, experimental music for voice alone embodies the presence of both vulnerability and strength in human expression.

As representative examples of the power of music for voice alone, let us now examine some early uses of the voice alone in repertoire, together with some more recent applications of the genre, particularly by Canadian composers. The connections between music for solo voice and lyric theatre will become evident through the exploration of manifestations of narrative, character development, and mood.

The repertoire for solo voice grew extensively beginning in the mid-twentieth century, branching out from the more traditional styles of composers like Head. At this point in the world of new music, experimentation and increased virtuosity was becoming a feature of many different composers’ outputs, including in vocal music. Composers such as Harrison Birtwistle, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, and Luciano Berio sought to release vocal music from its traditional role as sung poetry. Vocalists such as Cathy Berberian and Joan La Barbara experimented with vocal sounds beyond beautiful tone. What we call “extended techniques” began to emerge: these include grunts, multiphonics, harmonics, spoken and whispered words, squeaks, tongue clicks, and other vocal possibilities, all of which became potential vehicles for exploration.

Probably one of the most well-known works for solo voice is the *Sequenza III*, by the Italian composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003).¹ One of a series of works for solo instruments, this landmark vocal work, written in 1966, uses a very simple but evocative text by poet Markus Kutter: “Give me a few words for a woman to sing a truth allowing us to build a house without worrying before night comes.”² Berio took these words and broke them down into individual syllables and phonemes. Some are repeated quickly; others appear as complete words. The sounds weave themselves around

the complex musical phrases and numerous expressive and theatrical instructions given by the composer.

The Canadian composer and scholar Istvan Anhalt summarizes *Sequenza III* this way: “...Berio has created a vocal portrait of a woman, probably North American, who goes through a series of puzzling and disturbing vocal behaviours, making us wonder why she expresses herself in this manner and what she wants to convey to us.”³ There are some questions to be asked regarding Anhalt’s summary of this work. Why should we see this woman as being necessarily North American? Further, why should we wonder why the woman is expressing herself as she does? The work is dramatic and expressive, just as more traditional vocal works can be. We tend not to question why characters express themselves in more traditional genres. For example, we accept without a thought Mimi’s long monologue about herself in her aria “*Sì, mi chiamano Mimi*” as part of Puccini’s opera *La Bohème*. I prefer the description by the singer Cathy Berberian, Berio’s wife, who premiered the work: according to Berberian, *Sequenza* is “like an X-ray of a woman’s inner life.”⁴ Berio’s *Sequenza* is thus very much a work for the naked voice: it exposes not only the voice but also the inner feelings of the woman who contains the voice.

Another example from this “classic” period of the mid-twentieth century comes from John Cage (1912-1992). A musician, philosopher, writer and teacher, Cage is universally renowned for his explorations into sound and the delineations between what we classify as music and what as sound or noise. Much of Cage’s music employs chance or indeterminate techniques, resulting in compositions that are different every time they are performed. (There is a parallel here between other art forms: for example, the mobile sculptures of Alexander Calder represent aspects of indeterminacy because they appear differently each time they move in space.)

Cage’s *Aria* was written in 1958 and employs no musical notes, but rather a graphic and colourful score.⁵ With the vertical axis representing approximate pitch and the horizontal axis representing time, the coloured lines of the score indicate different vocal styles that the singer is invited to choose for him- or herself. Thus the piece has some structure, but also a great deal of variety from singer to singer, and from performance to performance. Each individual interpretation will be different.

In effect *Aria* becomes a vocal character study. The different colours/voices become different people, engaged in what is a discourse rather than a narrative. This fills the work with aural colour and humour and allows the performer to stretch her or his expressive wings in a way not possible in conventional scored music. *Aria* becomes a quite demanding technical feat, as the singer

must quickly change from voice to voice, style to style. This type of virtuosity is not generally required in more conventional vocal music. The versatility and expertise required in Cage's *Aria* makes this work vibrant, entertaining and impressive in performance – and all aspects of the work are created and performed by a single voice.

A further example of solo vocal music is a composition by Scottish composer Judith Weir, written in 1979.⁶ More conventional than Berio's and Cage's works because of its use of standard music notation and structure, *King Harald's Saga* is nonetheless challenging technically. This work is designated as an “opera” for solo voice: it requires the singer to take on eight different roles, plus a chorus of Norwegian soldiers. The singer also fills in the drama with spoken text, outlining the story of the medieval king, Harald, and his doomed quest to conquer England.

King Harald's Saga is clearly connected with the one-person show to be found in ample evidence in theatrical literature. Weir has simply extended the requirements to include singing, making this a sung theatre piece. The performer must try to find different colours and characters to delineate the various characters, much as in the John Cage *Aria*.

The singer must also represent the Chorus, singing a lusty ballad about the joys of being in the Norwegian army and the havoc that the men plan to wreak upon the English army. For a single soprano to pull this off, a good deal of humour and character is required as well as a vocal timbre that can somehow represent many voices. The work presents an exciting vocal challenge for a singer, as well as a good deal of fun developing characters and telling the story.

Of course, character portrayal is what all singers must do, no matter what type of music they sing, whether it is in recital or opera or theatre, whether it is with an ensemble, with a piano or alone. We always play roles, we always present characters and tell stories. This is a specialized requirement of a singer, different from any other musician; and this is the tie that binds us to lyric theatre. Music for solo voice emphasizes the links between music and drama by focusing dramatic and musical attention on one person, however many moods or characters that one person must represent.

More recent works for the voice alone may also include an audio soundtrack that is played along with the singer onstage. The recording could be seen as in a way “clothing” the nakedness of the voice alone. However, the basic aloneness of completely unaccompanied song is still very much a part of these works, despite the comfort and additional acoustic resources of having a supporting soundtrack. It is still up to the live performer onstage, alone, to make these works convincing.

Of particular interest in our own country, Canadian composers have made numerous contributions to the repertoire for solo voice. There tends to be a perception that this repertoire is highly specialized, although it need not be: the challenges and musical requirements of this repertoire can and should be accessible to any trained singer. Nonetheless, the repertoire remains something of a specialty area, and so these works are often created in response to a commission or request from a particular singer.

I have been fortunate enough to have had a number of works written for me, and I am delighted to publicize and promote them in this article; perhaps this will help to incite interest in other Canadian singers and teachers of voice in seeking out these works. The Canadian Music Centre, with its libraries across Canada and its extensive website (www.musiccentre.ca) provides ample information on these, and other works for voice by Canadian composers.

I have sought out works for solo voice via commissioning grants and collaborations with the composers. My interest in this genre has grown as I have amassed more works and have presented more performances. Of late my solo recitals have included mostly solo vocal material, eschewing the more traditional voice/piano repertoire. I have found the experience of presenting the solo voice repertoire to be liberating for me, allowing me to explore and extend my performative and expressive capabilities. I believe that these performances are exciting for my audiences, too, as they are given the chance to experience the power and vulnerability of the voice alone, and to feel that intrinsic physical connection, that visceral understanding of the vocal process, that is a unique part of any vocal performance but is particularly evident in the repertoire for the naked voice.

Montréal composer Helen Hall has written for voice in a number of instrumental settings, and also counts two works for solo voice in her repertoire.⁷ The earlier work, “Circuits” from 1990, is scored for solo voice and CD. The work was written for the American singer Joan La Barbara, a pioneer in the world of experimental and extended vocal techniques from the late 1960s onward.⁸ “Circuits” plays with and uses the intrinsic, basic, necessary act of breathing, which is essential for all humans but has its own supremacy and importance to a singer. The performer creates sound on the in-breath as well as the more usual out-breath, making an unusual and colourful vocal texture. The accompanying recording consists of La Barbara’s voice in multi-track, performing similar in-breath and out-breath phrases. Thus “Circuits” consists entirely of breath—the cycle of in-breath and the out-breath—as expression of sound and of life itself.

Hall's more recent work for solo voice, "In the Silence of Breathing Stars" uses the same vocal process but this time showcases it as a work for voice alone, without any recording. Written in 2010, this work was premiered by me in New Brunswick in September 2011, with subsequent performances in Ontario and Nova Scotia. Audience reaction has been very positive: listeners have expressed great interest in the actual vocal process of singing on the in-breath, and experience strong emotions elicited by the work. This is the voice stripped down to its essence, and it is a powerful vehicle for vocal and musical expression.

Processed recordings of my own voice, with which I sing along, form the audio soundtrack of the 2006 work by Canadian composer Ian Crutchley. Entitled "_____ Sings, and Sings and Sings!" (insert name of performer in the blank), this work is also available through the CMC Library program. The work also involves some level of indeterminacy and choice by the singer, as the structure includes both "Mandatory Songs," which are notated, and "Optional Songs," which consist simply of instructions that will yield slightly different results in each performance.

Within the Mandatory Songs, there are still some elements of indeterminacy. Crutchley plays with text here as he does not supply any specific words. Rather, he instructs the performer to use fragmented words as the basis of vowel and sound choices for each written-out musical phrase. Crutchley suggests using the names of the works on the current concert program in which the performance of his work is placed, as well as the names of the composers. He suggests breaking these names down into syllables, using the syllables as the texts for the Mandatory Songs. Thus each performance will differ in the combination of vowel-driven vocal sounds, depending on the program for the concert.

There are a number of Optional Songs, and they too may be changed for each performance. For example, one Optional Song simply indicates that the performer should sing the song heard most recently before the concert, as far as he/she can remember it. The work thus embraces some concepts as used in John Cage's much earlier work, but combines them with contemporary electro-acoustic processing to create a multi-layered vocal work. Crutchley's composition could be described as involving numerous solo singers onstage, all of them the same person.

Emily Doolittle and WL Altman have also written uniquely constructed works for solo voice. Doolittle's work "Social Sounds from Whales at Night" (2007) uses actual recordings of whale song, with which the singer interacts as if singing a duet with the whale.⁹ Percussion instruments such as the ocean drum and bamboo chimes, played by the singer, add to the mood of almost mystic connection with sounds of nature. Interestingly, and perhaps appropriately, there is no text in this

work, the composer preferring to score only open vowel sounds for the singer: this allows for closer integration with the animal sounds. An extensive improvised section partway through the work allows the singer to incorporate extended vocal techniques such as multiphonics, muttering, or “watery” splashing sounds, as well as repetitions of notated sections from the work. The performer must find a way to extend the ambience of the notated score through this improvised section, listening carefully to the accompanying soundtrack and creating a climax of vocal sound. Here we see a parallel, perhaps: the vulnerability of nature, and its potential for beauty and for disaster, partnered with the vulnerability of the naked voice.

Altman, a composer based in New Brunswick, features the voice alone, manipulated via live electronic processing, in his 2002 composition “is it because...” The work employs a simple line of text, translated into three languages, that is broken down in Berio-like fashion into syllables that play against each other to create not only an intriguing web of looped sounds, but also light-hearted references to language barriers, suggesting perhaps potential “pick-up” lines to use in a singles bar. (The text, in French, English and German, reads, “Is it because I cannot understand, that I find your language so sexy?”)

The work also makes reference to several varied iconic symbols of the twentieth century: Marlene Dietrich, a quotation from Arnold Schoenberg’s chamber work *Pierrot Lunaire*, a vocally-created rock drumbeat, and a recurring exhortation to “Listen!” This composition was premiered at Newfoundland’s Sound Symposium in July 2002.

Other Canadian composers who have written for the solo voice include Toronto composer Martin Arnold, whose work “Janet” I premiered at the OK.Quoi?! Arts Festival in Sackville, New Brunswick in July 2010.¹⁰ “Janet,” based on an old folk song, employs an electronic gate triggered by the solo singer, opening to a variety of sounds both electronic and natural (upon careful listening, one can hear a crow’s call, a guitar and banjo working through an ordered series of pitches, and a train whistle). Canadians Robert Morin and Jim O’Leary have also contributed to the genre, with works written for me that employ techniques including quarter tones, sung overtones, and structured improvisation. Halifax composer Jérôme Blais included a work for solo soprano in his *Plugged* series of compositions for amplified acoustic instruments.

The works outlined above serve only as examples of the wide variety of sound and expression that is possible in repertoire for the solo voice. Despite the apparent limitations presented by the single performer, alone onstage, this repertoire has generated much excitement and a special kind of challenge to composers. Not only does the genre stretch imagination and horizons

for the composer, it does the same for the singer who explores the repertoire. Singing alone onstage builds confidence and can expand any singer's palette of vocal timbres. Bringing these skills back to more standard repertoire will serve to enhance any performance, be it art song, opera, music theatre, or any other manifestation of lyric theatre.

There is much to be learned and expressed beyond the traditional concept of vocal beauty, and beyond traditional presentation of text and sound. The voice alone—the “original instrument”¹¹—has its roots in the very beginnings of our world musics. Its power and beauty continues to inspire composers and singers to create new sounds and new works—exposed by the voice alone, the naked voice.

Notes

¹ Luciano Berio, *Sequenza III*. London: Universal Editions, 1968.

² Markus Kutter (1925-2005) was a Swiss historian and politician.

³ Istvan Anhalt, “Berio’s *Sequenza III*: A Portrait” in *Alternative Voices*, ed. Istvan Anhalt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 25.

⁴ Cathy Berberian, quoted in Anhalt, *Alternative Voices*, 40.

⁵ John Cage, *Aria*. New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1960. It should be noted that there are a number of other works for solo voice by Cage: one need only look to his *Song Books*, also published by Peters, for a myriad of opportunities to explore the naked voice.

⁶ Judith Weir, *King Harald’s Saga* (London: Novello, 1979).

⁷ Helen Hall’s work is available through the Canadian Music Centre library loaning system. See <http://www.musiccentre.ca> for more information.

⁸ For more information about Joan La Barbara, visit her website at <http://www.joanlabarbara.com>

⁹ Emily Doolittle’s work can also be found through the Canadian Music Centre. For more information about Emily please visit <http://www.emilydoolittle.com>

¹⁰ The OK.Quoi?! Festival is an annual event. See http://www.strutsgallery.ca/OKquoi_2010/

¹¹ This is the title of a collection of recordings by Joan La Barbara originally released on LPs in the 1970s and early 1980s on her own Wizard Records. See <http://www.lovely.com/titles/cd3003.html> for information on the recordings, re-issued as two CDs.

Works Cited

- Anhalt, Istvan. “Berio’s *Sequenza III*: A Portrait.” In *Alternative Voices*, edited by Istvan Anhalt, 25-40. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.
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