

Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality

P. Karantonis, F. Placanica, A. Sivuvoja-Kauppalaa, P. Verstraete (eds.)
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Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality is a welcome exception to the dearth of critical writing on the titular artist, a central force in 20th century vocal music. Berberian's (1925-1983) creative and performative contributions to works ostensibly composed by Berio, Cage, Maderna, and others frequently amounted to co-authorship; and she spearheaded many of her own projects, including the piece *Stripsody*, the album *Beatles Arias*, and the recital series "À la recherche de la musique perdue." Notably, this is not the first substantial volume on Berberian. Marie Christine Vila's (2003) and Jennifer Paull's (2007)¹ formidable biographies emphasize Berberian's evocative performance style and her magnetic personality. The present volume, then, is unique in its focus on critical content and in its active effort to recover Berberian to a discourse that, until recently, has largely failed to acknowledge her creative achievements.

This collection treats as theoretical linchpin Berberian's credo-like "The New Vocality in Contemporary Music," originally published in Italian in 1966 and in English for the first time in the present volume. Berberian identifies the New Vocality with the "possibilities and musical attitudes" (47) arising from flexibility of vocal style and technique, interrogation of reality in the recording studio, and active discourse with tradition. This volume makes a convincing case that Berberian's is a radical and agential stance on voice, rendering her as much a composer as a performer.

Francesca Placanica frames many of the recurring themes of the collection, placing particular emphasis on the equation of performance and composition in Berberian's own work. Crucially, Berberian's (so-called) realizations have often become authoritative versions which directly influence subsequent vocalists' approaches to particular works. Equally significant is Berberian's wide stylistic facility, encompassing pop, classical, and contemporary art musics alike. Placanica relates this stylistic diversity to Berberian's stance of respectful but active engagement with tradition in "The New Vocality." Later in the collection, Kristin Norderval's chapter excerpts interviews with Meredith Monk, Joan La Barbara, Pamela Z, and other vocalists about Berberian's work. Many of these artists recall that Berberian's stylistic juxtapositions registered as truly paradigm-shifting.

Pieter Verstraete's chapter on *Stripsody* (1966) highlights the multiplicity of vocal characters that comprise this piece. For Verstraete, Berberian's adoption of numerous vocal personas – including Tarzan, a saucy little girl, and many nameless sound effects – destabilizes the sense of a unified

¹ Vila, Marie Christine. *Cathy Berberian, cant'actrice*. Paris: Fayard, 2003.

Paull, Jennifer. *Cathy Berberian and Music's Muses*. Tallahassee: Amoris, 2007.

composely voice underlying the work. Perhaps the greatest strength of this chapter is its discussion following Peter Kivy, who classifies song by the degree to which listeners suspend their disbelief about the performance context,² and Steven Connor, who argues that listeners customarily imagine the hypothetical body that produces a voice.³ Verstraete contends that Berberian's voicing of multiple characters causes listeners to imagine multiple hypothetical bodies, which in turn leads them to examine voice, embodiment, and performance in a new light.

Hannah Bosma's contribution centers on the tape piece *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (1958), a collaboration between Berberian, Luciano Berio, and Umberto Eco. Bosma argues that a primary outcome of listeners' interpretive work in this piece is the likening of Berberian's voice to that of the Siren of Homeric tradition. Several "cultural fictions" (110) around non-verbal voice inform this mapping of Berberian's voice to the Siren's, including the relationship between mother and young child in its pre-discursive phase, and the ambiguously "frightening or alluring" (111) female cry. Bosma concludes the chapter with the brief but tantalizing suggestion that, alternatively, the non-verbal voice may allude to pre-verbal language, admitting particular possibilities of beauty and structure. Throughout, Bosma's argument displays great restraint: though she herself seems to hope that disordered vocal sound can signify beauty instead of pure chaos, she acknowledges that the extant culture of listening favors the perhaps more obvious interpretation of Berberian's voice as Siren's.

Anne Sivuoja-Kauppalaa discusses the camp nature of Berberian's vocal recitals, including the series "À la recherche de la musique perdue" (c. 1971) and "Second Hand Songs" (c. 1980). She argues that Berberian's stage design, allusions to singing styles of other vocalists, and direct address of the audience express semi-knowing humor and constitute performance of self and context – hallmarks of camp. Sivuoja-Kauppalaa's notion that Berberian "turn[ed] the recital into the 'recital'" (134) is especially powerful in light of Berberian's simultaneous respect for and wariness of the recital tradition in "The New Vocality."

Pamela Karantonis argues that impersonation is key to Berberian's *oeuvre*, and that the singer's many vocal characterizations are so convincing precisely because she undertakes artful departures from classical vocal techniques and contexts. Thus, Karantonis suggests, the theoretical apparatus of opera studies is not well suited to addressing Berberian's work. Instead, performance studies is far more relevant, particularly because of Berberian's polystylism and her insistence that singers work to creatively interpret the music. Berberian's equal investment in the sonic and dramatic content of her work also manifests in her visual self-presentation. Karantonis rightly notes that "Berberian pointed the way for the contemporary singer, who must not only *sound* with the body but must author the visual presentation of the body in an expertly prepared way" (165; italics original).

² Kivy, Peter. "Speech, Song, and the Transparency of the Medium: A Note on Operatic Metaphysics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:1 (Winter 1994), 63-68.

³ Connor, Steven. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

One oft-cited work in this collection is *The Composer's Voice* (1974), in which Edward T. Cone theorizes the existence of a composerly presence, called a persona, underpinning a musical work.⁴ The contributors argue that Berberian herself provides much of this sense of compositional subject in the works she performs. Whether in her elaborate yet subtle improvisations in the recording studio or in her calculated and witty choice of performance costume, Berberian shapes compositional outcomes through her creative work. Yet the necessity of labeling Berberian a 'composer' so music history will remember her raises a much deeper issue. *Cathy Berberian* the book suggests that a re-calibration of the discourse is needed; we must ask why 'composers' gain easy entry into the canon but 'performers' do not.

Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality is a thorough-going and valuable addition to the conversation on one of the most influential vocalists of the twentieth century. This volume is particularly effective in conveying Berberian's facility with many vocal styles and her important work toward re-contextualizing the act of singing. *Cathy Berberian* the book is powerfully conscious of the discourse at large, and the diverse critical accounts herein take great strides toward reclaiming for Berberian a place in the dialogue and toward questioning the very process of canon construction.

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⁴ Cone, Edward T. *The Composer's Voice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.