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## The Singing Voice's Charms: Aesthetic and Transformative Aspects of Singing in Literature, Art, and Philosophy

### Abstract:

Music, as sung and listened to, has been described in many a tale as powerful and transformative. Yet, the important question is not so much if that claim is true or whether it may be verified, but what kind of power and transformation are alluded to in those mythical and literary sources? Taking these symbolic claims and elaborating on their possible meaning, alongside thinkers such as Carolyne Abbate or Roland Barthes, proceeds to find ways in which these claims may suggest different roles that music and singing play in human lives. As much as current musicological and anthropological academic narratives point to the power and its negotiation in society, there is more to singing voices' charms than this. The author points to an important transformation that happens when the human existential qualities found in the voice's imperfections (its materiality) are matched with the music's aesthetic qualities (its beauty, sublimity, its symmetry, its impression) to transform the listener and make her listen.

### Keywords:

voice, singing, music aesthetics, Carolyn Abbate, Theodor Adorno

*Rhythm is what keeps the song going, the horse galloping, the story moving*<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

I base this paper on a few assumptions, which need some explaining.<sup>2</sup> The most important of those assumptions is that music is believed to be persuasive (emotionally) and transformative. The first part of this assumption is easy to confirm, as such claims may be found in many sources, either as explicit statements, or – more often perhaps – as an image presented throughout the writing. The second part of this claim is less obvious. Nevertheless, I believe that music is seen as a medium for a deep, personal change, which I would like to call transformation. One may ask what transformation may be found as an effect of listening to music. This is my question as well. The transformation, that listening to music provides, I assume, may be based on emotions or follow from certain emotional changes. While the emotional change is always short-lived, the transformation means a more profound change. The important question seems to me not so much if such a claim is true (is the experience of music transformative?) or whether such a claim may be verified, but what kind of power and transformation are alluded to in those mythical and literary sources?

Before I proceed any further I need to explain how I understand music. For this paper, I take music to be ordered sound or designated sound structure,<sup>3</sup> but I also believe that music is what we call the object of the listening experience, and in this, it is the object of the perceptive processes with which we approach the world.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will concentrate on singing and song, as for many cultures music is a song first and foremost. This traditional view of music captures two very important aspects of music, the aspect of listening and the aspect of the narrative. To both of those topics, I shall come back to later.

In what follows, I would like to rethink the power of the singing voice and the intricacies of the relationship between the singing voice and the listening recipient. To do that, first, I will be following the images from literature and folklore, and then philosophical and musicological interpretations of those images. I would like to use some literary examples to point to the vision of music as powerful and influential. It is my aim in this paper to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between listening to music and understanding what happens upon listening. As we are often reminded, the relationship that develops while listening to a song is much more complex than the relationship between the singer and the listening subject. It includes the voice as the source, the singing as the physical and performative way of disseminating the voice, the song as a work of music, the total product of singing and the composer's and lyricist's work, and the narrative as the text or message attached to the song, the singing, or the voice. All of those elements provide different layers to the experiencing of music. In an attempt to understand the complexity of the relations in listening to music, and especially the song, I will start with some of the most familiar images present in folktales and literature. One

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1) Le Guin, *Steering the Craft*, 31.

2) A work written during realizing of scientific project "Philosophy of Music. Metaphysic, Phenomenological and Deconstructivist Paths in Researching Music, its Practice and Theory," NCN 2016/23/B/HS1/02325.

3) See Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, and Levinson, "What a Musical Work is."

4) To see music in just one form, seems to be utterly misguided. Music is many different things to different people, but more importantly, the quest to find what kind of object it is, seems futile. That is why Roman Ingarden proposed to see different beings of music – or different stages, in which it appears in the world. We could simply say, that music is a process, but then we would be tempted to see it as a physical process, which it is not, or as psychological process – an imagined music, which would also be insufficient. This is why it is important to acknowledge both the perceptive processes in which, humans perceive music, as the object of human creation that is presented to the world as a sounding object, or a structure.

such story is the story of the sirens or the story of Orpheus, but there are many more. Carolyn Abbate in the first chapter of *Unsung Voices* attempts to uncover this complexity and leads the way through the various ways of understanding operatic practice. While doing all that, she also presents a certain image of music as an affective power, to which I shall point at the moment. I would also like to refer to Roland Barthes' "The Grain of the Voice" to suggest a different way to understand the singing voice, and finally, I would like to focus on the true importance of listening.

## II. The Images of Music

The experience of listening to a song is mentioned in myths, legends, and fairy tales, where the experience of singing often initiates a deep personal change.<sup>5</sup> Most often these images of song, as song and song-singing are said to be the oldest forms of narrative practice present in most cultures throughout the ages.<sup>6</sup> This presence is recognized and mirrored in literature and so my first example comes from Ursula K. Le Guin's famous saga *Earthsea*. Ursula K. Le Guin is known for her daring imagination, but she is also known for building new worlds based on anthropological knowledge. In this excerpt, the main character experiences the song as a medium of powerful emotional change.

Sparrowhawk listened to the young voice ... and the tears came into his eyes, blinding. Arren was silent for a while after that song; then he began to sing lesser, lighter tunes, softly... . When he ceased to sing everything was still, the wind down, the waves small, wood and rope barely creaking.<sup>7</sup>

The literary image presented here seems paradigmatic. It shows the song's effects as both individual and universally potent. The listening subject is emotionally affected but so are the waves, and the wind around him. The singer chooses the right song to change the emotional state of the listener and brings him back into a calmer state of mind. Similar images may be found in Greek mythology, with Orpheus charming the beasts being one of the most famous examples. Robert Graves describes Orpheus in his *Greek Myths* as the greatest musician that ever lived, "as not only enchanted wild beasts but made the trees and rocks move from their places to follow the sound of his music."<sup>8</sup> Catherine Bernard presents an image of the singer, whose abilities allow him to control the crowd: "First, the stranger played a lullaby that made the crowd fall asleep for two days. Next, he played a song so sad they all began to weep. Finally, he played a joyous song, to which they all cheered and danced."<sup>9</sup>

According to Joseph Campbell playing music and singing songs was often presented as one of the main elements of the hero's unique qualities.<sup>10</sup> In literature, this presentation of music seems less frequent, yet we may still see it in the excerpt from Le Guin's novel. Similarly, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, singing is presented as powerful and intimately direct, often changing the emotional state of the listening subject: "After dinner

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5) In de Nora and Ansdell's "What Can't Music Do" this problem is discussed in reference to methodological as well as conceptual disparities between what is expected and assumed and what can be measured and observed. The category of "change" seem not best fitted for describing the possible effects of music and its role in communities. See de Nora and Ansdell, "What Can't Music Do."

6) See Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, and Blacking, "The Value of Music in Human Existence."

7) Le Guin, "The Furthest Shore," 28.

8) Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 37.

9) Bernard, *Celtic Mythology*, 20–21.

10) See Campbell, "The Masks of God," 54.

Natasha, at Prince Andrei's request, went to the clavichord and began singing. Prince Andrei stood by a window talking to the ladies and listened to her. In the midst of a phrase he ceased speaking and suddenly felt tears choking him, a thing he had thought impossible for him."<sup>11</sup>

### III. The Sirens

Perhaps the first and most powerful image of dispensing the power of song may be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer describes the sirens as creatures whose ability to control anyone listening to their song was overpowering and menacing: "Sirens who enchant all who come near them. If anyone unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again."<sup>12</sup>

The image from Homer is powerful and dreadful – *the high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him*,<sup>13</sup> who shall listen – but the sirens have long since gained a more beautiful and less violent presentation. In Plato's *Republic*, the sirens are an important part of the makeup of the world producing the most beautiful harmony. Sitting at the top of the circles they hum the sounds that together with others form the most wonderful harmony, an accord of beauty: "The spindle turns on the knees of necessity; and on the upper surface of each circle is a siren, who goes round with them, hymning a single tone or note. The eight together form one harmony."<sup>14</sup>

Plato does not dwell on the danger of siren songs, perhaps he no longer sees them as dangerous. In this rendition, the voices of sirens are both cosmic and inhuman, but still beautiful and harmonious. Their singing exhibits the complex relationship between danger and beauty, between being vulnerable and being open to unknown experiences. The image of sirens seducing sailors with their songs is still very much present in literature. It is worth mentioning that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer explore the development of reason and the subjective self, using among others, the myth of sirens. The authors present the image of sirens and their dangerous song from the point of view of the behavior of Odysseus – the most cunning of men – as an allegory of using reason as a weapon.<sup>15</sup> However, the same image might just as well be used to describe an aesthetic situation, where the recipient is willing to be open to beauty but employs various ways of resisting the aesthetic at the same time. The analysis or scrutinizing of the aesthetic data as well as the assessment and judgment put upon them are precisely such ways of opposing and resisting the aesthetic charms. In the aesthetic situation – the aesthetic experience and judgment in particular – the subject puts herself in a distance precisely to avoid being driven and rendered helpless to the irresistible beauty and power of the song or more generally that, which is aesthetic. Even for Odysseus the advice is to listen, yet in such a way that will prevent falling under the sirens' spell and thus preventing the danger while still enjoying the song; this has highlighted the power, beauty, as well as the power of the sirens.

The allegory of the sirens makes it clear that the source of the power lies in the singing voice more than it does in the song itself. A power greater than anything else and believed to be equal to the natural powers of the sea or the wind are harbored by the singing voices. No one who hears their song can escape.<sup>16</sup>

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11) Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 499.

12) Homer, *The Odyssey*.

13) Ibid.

14) Plato, "Republic," 1467.

15) Adorno, and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26. Adorno and Horkheimer see the *Odyssey* as the allegory of the formation of the self as, and an element of, the development of reason. The image of resisting the powers of sirens' song to maintain freedom is than used to unmask this gesture – the self-aware rational move of the developed self.

16) Ibid.

The voices of the sirens are mechanically potent, so to speak, actively changing the listening subject, but they are also beautiful and worth listening to. It is worth noticing that the power of the singing shown as incising is still admired. To avoid the siren's song entirely would be to ignore it and not listen to it, but to listen to it while disabled and to react is to acknowledge the pure beauty of the singing while consciously avoiding being submitted to its charms, whatever they may be. In Adorno's and Horkheimer's reading of Odysseus's adventure, the sirens and their song are taken to be the primitive power, a modern man must avoid at all costs, rather than the beauty in its pure form.

#### IV. The Narrative *Versus* Voice

The song of the sirens works as a spell or an incantation; it is a manifestation of the power of the singing voice. However, there are many factors to consider in singing or listening to a song. Factors such as the lyrics, the narrative,<sup>17</sup> the singing, and the voice itself are the ones the listening subject thinks most often about. In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate<sup>18</sup> discusses the complex relationship between the narration, the voice as a communicator, and the music understood as independent from the story in the opera. Abbate tries to understand the power behind the voices and the narratives woven into the music. Drawing on the political and social understanding of narrative, where the narrative is a story we are lured to believe as the consequence of the smartly planted suggestions either in the music, in the presentation of the characters, or in the text accompanying the music, Abbate points to the changes in the understanding of the meaning of the opera pointing to the hidden narratives present in the opera, revealing them to be the medium of power and not just the mediators of the content.

Abbate begins with an example of the "Bell Aria" from Léo Delibes' opera *Lakmé*. The "Bell Song" – known and cherished as the wonderful soprano *coloratura* – is a narrative in its own right, and as it turns out it is sung precisely to secure the desired aim, which in this particular story is finding out and capturing the intruder. In the opera, the power of narrative – seductive in many meanings of the word – is prepared and expected to work as a seductive tool. The power comes both from the voice itself and the musical narrative and also from the sorcerer and priest who tries to control the priestess and make her charm and in the end destroy the intruder. The operatic narrative tells the story, in which the singing subject – the priestess with an angelic voice – is forced to use her voice for an outcome she may not desire. The narrative is, therefore, layered with different meanings and purposes, which are sometimes inconsistent, but one might say, the main purpose is to show the great power of the song and musical narrative itself. The example suggests that the music is powerful in its execution and even if the singing subject may not wish it, its charm will affect the listeners in the strongest of ways. In the particular example, Abbate discusses, the singing voice and the persona on stage are forced to become an instrument in both senses – the musical instrument rather than the communicator of meanings and the instrument of vengeance. The soprano's voice is transformed and extremely effective. Abbate comments:

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17) There are many different traditions as to the use of the concept of narrative. The literary, or more generally the cultural tradition is certainly different than the musical one. But even in music, narrative does not always refer to the text, which is sung or accompanies the song or instrumental music. It is often the story that may be invented or assumed because of the music. It may also mean the structure of the song or of instrumental music devoid of lyrics, or as Abbate suggests the general story behind the whole work – in this case the opera – or even the story that is forced, or suggested as the one the listener needs to believe. In many musicological studies, narrative in music may refer to the structure of the music understood in most general way, where a particular moment in music is taken to be analogous to characters or actions. See more in Maus "Music as Narrative," 7–8, and Levinson, "Music as Narrative and Music as Drama."

18) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*.

Pure voice commands instant attention. . . . In opera, we rarely hear the voice both unaccompanied and stripped of text – and when we do (in vocal cadenzas typical of Italian arias, for example) the sonority is disturbing perhaps because such vocalizing so potently focuses our sense on the singing voice as the one that can compel *without* the benefit of words.<sup>19</sup>

Abbate reminds us that the singing voice is autonomous in another sense as well. It drives attention to itself, and thus away from words, plot, character, and even from music as it resides in the orchestra.<sup>20</sup>

But the narrative is also as significant as it often has an allegorical role to play. In this particular example, Lakmé's song is, as Abbate maintains: "a common operatic type, a song whose *reflexive* narrative text, prefigures the plot of the opera, in which it appears."<sup>21</sup>

These two potent elements of the narrative, often being assumed or expected due to cultural beliefs,<sup>22</sup> and the (singing) voice, are the most important part of the opera, or more generally of the song. As Abbate reminds the reader that despite the plot, which leaves the female characters helpless or dead most of the time, the singing voice remains undefeated, speaking across the crashing plot.<sup>23</sup> The voice in music, as Abbate points out, means simply different musical lines, it also means the type of voices, which are so important for the opera. But in the opera as much as instrumental music, it is not "just" the human voice but the symbolic presentation, those rare gestures in music, either vocal or nonvocal, that may be perceived as modes of subject's enunciations.<sup>24</sup> In the story of the opera *Lakmé*, which in Abbate's analysis, the singing voice is given priority, but it is also manipulated; it is used to fulfill the plot of the opera. Similarly, perhaps, the feminine voices are in general seen through their terrible fates or undermined roles they play. Yet the voice as the source of sonority, or as a presence of resonating intelligence,<sup>25</sup> may instead be seen through its successful and undiminished musical presentation. Its subjective, human material, and imperfect presence. It is its powerful and skillful dominating presence that attracts the listener, commanding her to listen.

In "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes raises similar questions. On what does the uniqueness of the voice rely? What does its beauty rely on? Barthes focuses on the voice's materiality, subjectivity, and undeniable power over the listener. He talks about vocal music as the encounter between a language and a voice, where the latter is always mysterious and shadowed by an element of the unknown, yet at the same time remaining powerful and demanding.<sup>26</sup> The voice – maintains Barthes – remains unaccounted for when everything else seems ready to be evaluated and assessed. Barthes' account of the vocal music is indeed very persuasive. He puts himself at the disposal of the (singing) voice confessing the impossibility of describing the effect the voice has over him (the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing.)<sup>27</sup> The grain of the voice lies in its imperfection, its refusal to be perfect, its resignation from remaining musically

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19) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 4.

20) *Ibid.*, 10.

21) *Ibid.*, 6.

22) See Lyotard's final definition of the narrative in his *Postmodern Condition*, "Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated what they do." Lyotard, "Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge," 23.

23) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, IX.

24) *Ibid.*

25) *Ibid.*, 28.

26) Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 181.

27) *Ibid.*



intact, giving way to the word, the narrative, and the language. But it is really what is happening? Perhaps the so-called perfection is not so easily won, as Barthes seems to think. Perhaps it is a constant struggle to forget oneself or lose oneself in music. To reach the musicality despite the language and the narrative built upon it?

Barthes compares different singers, who are revered for their musical and vocal skills, trying to uncover the nature of their voices and their particular way of delivering the lyrics. Their ability to show their voices.

## V. The Singing of the Song

Abbate differentiates between the singing and the narrative of the song. She speaks about the embodied voices as the main actors in the operatic scene. But at the same time the voice – a particular singular voice – must be differentiated from the voice that is the type, the product of years of studying. The voice is different from the singing, not only in the obvious sense of producing the current sound and executing the musical part but also in the sense that the voice is schooled, practiced, developed, and very much the aim of the performance or in fact, of the whole long process of developing, while the singing, coming back to Barthes' suggestion, is never fully accounted for. The voice is the singer (there is no voice without the singer) and as such, the singer disappears behind the voice. The deep, dark, strong, unwavering dramatic soprano of Jessye Norman (1945–2019) or the light and yet strong and powerful dramatic tenor of Roberto Alagna (b. 1963). Their voices, even as unique as they are, have been trained – professionally or in experience – following an envisioned purpose and achievement of a product, a successful rendering of the vocal power into one, standardized thing – the voice. The voice, in this sense, is what has been groomed and developed, maintained, and publicized. It is prized and valued believed to be the best of the singing abilities of the singer, all made into one. Abbate stresses the multiple roles of the voice in opera and music performances: "An attraction to opera means an attraction to singers' voices – this goes without saying. But there is also a radical autonomization of human voice, that occurs, in varying degrees, in all vocal music. The sound of the singing voice becomes the 'voice-object,' and a sole object for the listeners' attention."<sup>28</sup>

A voice in music is also a way of dividing music into instrumental and musical lines. It is also, finally, the singing body (music originates from human bodies),<sup>29</sup> the actual, personal singing voice.

The singing, as the actual process of producing sound under given circumstances, is always more fragile, and more dependent on conditions, both the outer – physical – and inner – the psychological. Singing is never just a production aimed at producing a perfect rendition of the music, it is a very performative effort, which relies on the voice – established through earlier strenuous training – as well as on the whole body's readiness to perform. Singing in opposition to the already established voice is a struggle. It is the singing, nevertheless, that manages to move the listeners to tears, it is the singing that changes the music – the score – into a personal, subjective story.<sup>30</sup>

## VI. The Power to Transform

In *Unsung Voices*, Abbate talks about the singing voice as the one that can compel without the benefit of the words.<sup>31</sup> The belief that the singing voice may change the listener is present in literary and philosophical sources.

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28) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 10.

29) *Ibid.*, 12.

30) It can also be said about instrumental music. Yet, in singing the personal story is voiced as the story behind the music and as the personal, subjective story as well.

31) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 4.

Rousseau proclaimed:

The musician will not only be able to agitate the sea, ignite the flames of fire, role the waters of the stream, evoke the hum of the rain and overflowed rivers, but he will also paint the horrors of grim wastelands, gloomy walls of underground dungeon, calm the tempest, ease and clear the yonder, bring out new freshness for the forests and meadows from the orchestra. He will not present those directly but he will awaken in the soul the same feelings that are experienced when one sees such effects.<sup>32</sup>

Rousseau believed in melody and the expression of emotions as primary forces within music. He also placed all abilities within composers or musicians, believing them capable of manufacturing any effect they desire. However, for Rousseau, the power of music is not just the emotional expression but has to do with the human element present in vocal music and most of all in songs. And in vocal music and songs, as for Rousseau, the most important and valuable element has to be the human aspect of the voice. In other words, in songs and vocal music, the power lies with the singing voice. The power to move and the power to transform. What I have in mind when using the term transformation is not just the affective influence over the listener, but the potential to initiate profound change within her.

I would also like to propose a slight correction to Rousseau's claim. Rousseau believed that the power of music is the power to express and evoke emotions in listeners. I would like to suggest that listening to music does more than making the listener emotional, make her cry, or make him feel happy. Peter Kivy, with whom I gladly side with this time, explains the power of music to move as the power of beauty and aesthetic qualities. Kivy claims that music moves the listener not emotionally but that it moves her to realize its beauty, the aesthetic qualities of a given musical work.<sup>33</sup>

My claim is that music transforms the listening subject in many ways. Yet, the most important way is the subject's initiated change or, as I would like to call it, transformation within – which may only happen if the subject is fully aware and aesthetically attentive. And there – in the transforming role of the music – the singing voice, the subject-voice, and not the voice-object, mentioned by Abbate,<sup>34</sup> lies the real power of the singing of a song. Barthes notices that the singing voice is the material source of music, it is what makes it so powerful especially when it is left unmastered, when it sings against the grain, so to speak.<sup>35</sup> Using Kristeva's division between the pheno-text and geno-text, he chooses to speak about the pheno-song, understood as everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values (the matter of acknowledged tastes, of fashions, of critical commentaries);<sup>36</sup> and the geno-song, which he explains as the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space from which significations germinate within language, and in its very materiality. Further, the geno-song:

Forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work.<sup>37</sup>

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32) See Rousseau, "Essai sur l'origine des langues," 422.

33) Kivy, *Music Alone*, 146–72.

34) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 4.

35) Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 234.

36) Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.

37) *Ibid.*, 182..



Barthes talks about the deep material element of the voice, its grain, which rarely gets revealed. In playing the two different types of singing against each other, he tries to capture the elements of less perfected execution, of the materiality of the voice. The singer is less careful and less calculated in his performance; when the singer gets carried away by his singing, thus revealing the voice as the material source of the sonority, the individual, even if trained, source of life. One might say it is the difference, that Barthes is looking for in the singing voice. The difference between materiality, and subjective experience, of singing through language.

Barthes believes that the singing voice's power may change the listener, make her cry, shake her confidence, and electrify her whole being (the trill). How does one describe the transforming power of the singing voice? What kind of change, what kind of transformation happens in the process of listening? The first important change is the attentive focus on the singing voice's qualities. Close attention to the way the voice uses language. Attention to the way the material aspects of the voice, its flaws and imperfections are heard despite the years of training, which make it even more human – the way the singing voice raises above the skillful execution of the score to achieve the expression. Its qualities, be it subtlety, harmony, the strength of delivery, expressive raptures, or something else. Whatever those qualities, if they are so strongly present in the performance that they reach out to the audience, they have the potential to transform listeners. There is yet one other special quality, which may be found in the listeners, and which I would like to call harmonizing, but which could also be seen as dialoguing.<sup>38</sup> Dialoguing, or harmonizing, means creating dialogue, adding to the existing voice a new one, and singing along. The dialogue in the sung music may be realized in many different ways. In an operatic ensemble, the singers singing together create a common vocal space or dramatic tension. More generally in vocal music it is like cooperation and singing together are aimed at achieving a beautiful performance. There is also another type of dialogue I would like to talk about, the dialogue with the listener. One of the peculiar features of listening to music is the urge to join in. This may easily be seen by listening to and watching some performers, most notably Glenn Gould and Martha Argerich. But, I strongly believe, that while listening to the most wonderful music, this urge reaches almost everybody. The desire to sing along, to gesture, to add in some way, and to be part of the music is overwhelming.

In 1976 Cleo Laine and Ray Charles recorded<sup>39</sup> a version of Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess."<sup>40</sup> This jazz version of the opera so full of expression and so different from any traditional opera singing, points precisely to the materiality of voice. Every air on that record is sung as a jazz improvisation that is still an expression of a certain theme and a certain character. But these improvisations and personal narratives are fully incorporated into the narrative of jazz, the narrative of groove, blues, harmonic transgressions, and showing new paths. These dialogues and musical equilibristic are based on the materiality of voice. One hears the transformation of the

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38) In music theory harmony or harmonizing has to do with adding "layers" to the music's tonality thus extending it (as in tonal harmony). In the words of Dahlhaus, harmony means "the juxtaposition of the disparate – of higher and lower notes – both in the vertical (in the structure of chords or intervals) and in the horizontal (in the relationship of intervals or chords to one another)." Dahlhaus, *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Following this meaning of harmony or tonal harmony, harmonization means adding cords (completing tonality) of the given melody, song or simple music, but it may also mean simply adding new voices to the music and in singing together creating another voice, usually in the interval of 3<sup>rd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>. In my paper I speak about harmonizing in this latter sense.

39) *Ray Charles and Cleo Laine – Porgy & Bess*, RCA Victor, LP (1976), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_4gMwLrGng](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_4gMwLrGng) (accessed June 7, 2022).

40) Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has been called the Great American Opera but it also has been questioned as to the role it played for black musicians and black music. See *Encyclopedia Britannica's* description of the opera's background here: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Gershwin/Porgy-and-Bess> (accessed June 7, 2022) and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/arts/music/porgy-bess-gershwin-metropolitan-opera.html> (accessed June 24, 2022).

character, his struggles, and pains, into the music's endless expressive power and its infinite beauty.<sup>41</sup> Jazz music as such, perhaps, is based on recognition and appreciation of the imperfections of the voice, the breath, and the instrument, not as shortcomings, of course, but as expressive and impressive qualities – the truth. As a closing remark, let me point to one of James Baldwin's characters, a jazz piano player named Sonny. In Baldwin's short story the very truth of music is not something that may be explained in words; it is, nevertheless, the truth that needs to be listened to: "I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at least, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did."<sup>42</sup>

Here again, listening demands cooperation, perhaps in a different way, as understanding and acknowledging the pain may only be done in private, but it requires full attention.

## VII. Conclusions

In the first chapter of her book, *Unsung Voices* Carolyn Abbate pointed out that the voice cannot be suppressed in speculation on music.<sup>43</sup> The (singing) voice in its materiality and subjectivity is what remains most powerful in the opera. It may present the narrative that undermines it, and still extend the most thrilling power over the listening subjects.<sup>44</sup> Throughout this paper, I have tried to understand the claims presented in literature and folklore portraying songs and the singing voice as powerful tools that instigated instant, even if short-lived, change. Trying to understand what this change and what the power of sung music could be I turned to authors, who have been analyzing the power of the voice. Following them, I would like to present a slightly different image of the exerted power of the singing voice. I am ready to claim that when the singing voice is listened to, the song does become the source of the change – often a powerful transformation. But this transformation comes from within the listener. She must be ready and willing to change. Her experience must first be based on attentive listening, on rejoicing in music's qualities. It is then that the materiality and subjectivity of the singing voice will lead to change. Not in any measured way, but in building relations and allowing for expressing oneself, or as Barthes suggested, for losing oneself: "the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce – to express – that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it."<sup>45</sup> The power of the singing voice is what leads to joining in "with the music," in singing, harmonizing, in focusing on the beauty of the music. It is perhaps this power to draw attention to itself that has led to describing song singing as an undeniable force.

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41) One of the often cited examples is Billy Holiday singing with so much emotion, so expressively and as if in pain. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DGY9HvChXk>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI> (accessed September 23, 2022).

42) Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 148.

43) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 14.

44) This power has been seen as violent by some interpreters. "Musical resonance and especially the singing voice remain potentially 'violent,' but are either domesticated by music or placed in a theatrical cage to guarantee 'safe' exhibition by the distanced spectator." See Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body."

45) Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 188.

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