This essay analyzes the use of extended-voice technique and "extreme" vocalizations in Peter Maxwell Davies's avant-garde music-theatre work *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. Using poststructuralist and musicological theories of voice, the essay makes the case for a conception of "queer vocality" that disrupts and subverts socio-cultural and aesthetic norms.

Alternative Vocalities: Listening Awry to Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*

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On 22 April 1969, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, the Pierrot Players presented a new "music theatre" work by British composer Peter Maxwell Davies, entitled *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. It was a veritable *succès de scandale*. Scored for male vocalist and chamber ensemble, Davies's work, based on a libretto by Randolph Stow, is a musical-theatrical examination of the "madness" of King George III. Over the course of eight songs, the vocalist, who appears to act the role of the "mad" King, engages in a series of delusional musings to himself and feverish exchanges with the members of the chamber ensemble, whom he casts as personages or entities in his fantasies. The premiere performance of this work showcased the vocal talents of Roy Hart (for whom Davies composed the work), who had the ability to sing in upwards of five octaves and could execute a variety of unusual vocal effects. In their staging of *Eight Songs*, the Pierrot Players mixed the conventions of concert performance and chamber opera, thereby making a spectacle of the work and

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the performers. Hart, attired in a purple flannel dressing gown and ermine nightcap, alternately sang, screeched, howled, croaked, and wheezed the words of the text, while the musicians, with the exception of the keyboard and percussion players, were placed in individual cages on the stage and spot lit. The caged instrumentalists (clarinettist, cellist, flautist, and violinist) were not costumed and did not "act" per se, but were nevertheless enlisted into the fantasy world of the piece in that they became objects of the vocalist's attention. For example, in one song, the flautist is imagined as one of the King's caged birds; in another, the percussionist is figured as the King's keeper.

Eight Songs is an acknowledged classic of the late- to mid-twentieth-century musical avant-garde. It is thought to have established music theatre as a credible and provocative new genre (or pseudo-genre) that subverted and redeployed existing performance conventions. The neologism *music theatre* (not to be confused with musical theatre)—a translation from the German *Musiktheater*—was used in central Europe, primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, to designate experimental forms of interaction between the concert stage and the theatre. The term was intended to distinguish musical-theatrical performance works that did not necessarily belong in the opera house, the Broadway theatre, or the traditional stage (Salzman 10). *Eight Songs* heralded Peter Maxwell Davies as one of the leading exponents of the form (and of the British musical avant-garde); furthermore, it raised the profile of the actor-cum-theatre deviser-cum-vocal experimenter, Roy Hart, and caused a minor controversy on account of the work's *outré* vocal and musical stylizations. "Some of the huge audience protested vociferously," noted William Mann, music critic for *The Times.* "The piece is meant to have a nerve-wrecking effect, and does so. It also discloses many disturbing, moving facets of musical expression. And Mr. Hart's performance is truly extraordinary" (16). Desmond Shawe-Taylor, writing in *The Sunday Times,* noted: "[Though] there were some scattered protests during the performance, the virtuosity of the composer and of his interpreters aroused prolonged and enthusiastic applause at its end" (58).

Indeed, the success of *Eight Songs* was arguably a result of a combination of factors, including (but not limited to) the curious mixture of performance conventions, Davies's daring compositional style, the composer's effective (and often affecting) setting of Stow's delusional King figure, and Roy Hart's facility with extended-voice technique and ability as a performer. In addition to requiring that the vocalist have an extended vocal range, Davies's work includes notations in the singer's part for chordal effects, articulated breathing, overtones, harmonics, and variations of *Sprechgesang* (a type of vocal enunciation between speech and song). In this way, *Eight Songs* makes a foray into the unstable—and frankly unsettling—territory of "extreme" vocalizations, eschewing the tradition of bel canto singing in favour of a musical and performative

investigation of the tortured voice, the ecstatic voice, the artful voice, the broken voice, and perhaps even the "voiceless" voice. One needs to hear *Eight Songs* in order to fully appreciate these complex and multifold vocal striations. To this end, I encourage readers to seek out a recording of the work, or to listen to excerpts online, especially if they are not familiar with the weird and wonderful sounds produced by extended-voice technique and by voice *in extremis*.[1]

Critical engagement with *Eight Songs,* and with Davies's oeuvre in general, has been relatively lacking, which is perhaps indicative of the largely honorific status that the work currently holds. Alan E. Williams, in an essay on madness in Davies's music-theatre works, suggests that the "critical life" of *Eight Songs* has "passed away," "while its acceptance into the canon of contemporary music, in which it simply asserts the values of that establishment, is well under way" (80). Williams argues that Davies's work partook of the iconoclasm of the 1960s avant-garde in bringing types of violence into the concert hall and subverting the musical establishment. He further argues that *Eight Songs* was informed by contemporaneous discourses about madness, but that the "radical chic" that madness may have had in the late 1960s now dates the work and renders its use of musical violence liable to misinterpretation (84). Unlike Williams, I am unwilling to label *Eight Songs* a period piece whose performative and interpretive moment has passed, although I do appreciate the historical and discursive contextualization of Davies's work that he provides. Rather, I suggest that *Eight Songs* remains instructively problematic, and that it has something important to say to us—or to sing to us—in the here-and-now. As a piece of music theatre—which is not quite opera, concert performance, or theatre, but a curious admixture of all three—Davies's *Eight Songs* is aligned simultaneously with a "high" modernist aesthetic that distrusts theatricality and cultivates in its stead formal complexity, abstraction, and autonomy of resources, and with a more postmodern, almost poststructuralist aesthetic that valorizes performance, play, citation, and pastiche. It is the poststructuralist dimension of Davies's work that I wish to explore in this essay. More precisely, I want to consider the way in which *Eight Songs*' virtuosic, extreme vocalizations may be thought to exemplify a type of "queer vocality." In theorizing a queer voice and a queer aesthetic in *Eight Songs,* I am cognizant of the hermeneutic trap of hearing "into" the voice and the music, thereby mapping a set of concerns that the composer and performer may neither have shared nor intended. Despite the fact that Davies is gay, and has in recent years advocated on behalf of gay rights, his music should not or does not necessarily reflect his sexuality at all, although the possibility that it might is deserving of attention. I investigate the concept of queer vocality cautiously, not with the intention of stereotyping or delimiting vocal utterance, but with the intention of using the concept

as an interpretive strategy, a means of "listening awry" that puts Davies's work in conversation with scholarly debates about music, sexuality, and vocal types. I borrow the term *listening awry* from Jim Drobnick, who has transposed Slavoj Žižek's phrase *looking awry* to mean, attending to something, not straightforwardly, but from an angle, from an "interested" rather than an objective position (11).

In this essay, I propose to listen awry to the interpretive cruxes presented by the performance of extreme vocalizations in *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in order to adumbrate a conception of queer vocality that recognizes the material and political significance of voice as a musical category and a social reality. In the first section of this essay, I situate Davies's work in its historical context, paying particular attention to the involvement and importance of Roy Hart in determining the polyvalent meanings of the work. I then outline a materialist conception of voice by building on the observations and theories of a number of different scholars. Finally, I provide a close reading/listening of *Eight Songs* as both text and performance that makes the case for—and tests the efficacy of—the notion of queer or alternative vocalities.

The "extreme" vocalizations of *Eight Songs* are not screams from—or to—a void; Davies's work relates to a tradition of New Vocalism primarily in mid-twentieth-century avant-garde composition. In the New Vocalist tradition, new vocal techniques, sonorities, and expressive potentials were explored in an effort to defamiliarize and reconstitute conventions of singing and the nature of voice itself. Proponents of New Vocalism, including Luciano Berio, Cathy Berberian, George Crumb, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt, and Peter Maxwell Davies, often composed in collaboration with a particular performer. They fashioned a new complexity of vocal utterance that rejected the bel canto tradition in favour of a range of alternative vocalizations that did not aim at aesthetic beauty, necessarily. Rather, the human voice was valued for its own sake, in all its strangeness and its capacity to sound "other." In this regard, New Vocalism participated in a more general trend in mid-century virtuoso instrumental writing that tested the limits of technical facility and figured formal complexity as an end unto itself.

The vocalizations of *Eight Songs* are distinctive, however, in that they do not denote abstract voice play or purely expressionistic sonic effects, as in Berio's *Sequenza III,* for example. Rather, Davies marries extended-voice technique with clever characterization and setting of the score's text. The theatrical component of Davies's work is vital, and it complicates the interpretation of the work considerably, as I will indicate later. The vocalist of this piece may or may not represent King George III; the character he portrays may or may not be mad, may or may not be confined, may or may not

believe that he is conversing with his caged birds, and so on. All one can know for certain is that the vocalist is performing, but performing what? Extended-voice technique and ambiguous performativity create an uneasy synthesis in this work, which one may interpret as a powerful representation of madness, as a liberated, radicalized subjectivity, or as an index of a type of vocality that sets itself in opposition to hegemonic norms. This essay seeks to outline the nature of this vocality.

I wish to highlight the importance of Roy Hart as a muse figure for Davies and to suggest that the tradition of vocal production and theatre-making that Hart brought to *Eight Songs* was a major contributing factor to both the complexity of the work and to its quasi-scandalous success. Hart was born in South Africa but spent most of his life in England, where he trained at RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) in London. In the 1960s, he formed a theatre collective, the Roy Hart Theatre, which had as its aim the development and execution of the eight-octave voice as a concept and practice. This vocal technique and ideology was a legacy of the German voice specialist Alfred Wolfsohn, who was Hart's teacher and mentor. The premise of the Wolfsohn/Hart eight-octave voice is that individuals are stunted emotionally and personally by the strictures of conventional vocal ranges and modes of production (i.e., by the myth of the one-octave voice). By learning to vocalize in alternative ranges and to make sounds that are traditionally deemed improper, impure, or simply unpleasant, the individual releases psychological "blocks" and sings out the different parts of his or her personality or psyche. Wolfsohn explains:

> Man has for centuries failed to appreciate his voice; he has underestimated it and neglected it and allowed it to waste away; he has virtually strangled it, chained it up and confined it to a straitjacket; as he has done before, man has once again turned his sinning against nature into a dogma: the dogma of tightly restricted, neatly labeled categories—male and female voices, high and low voices, children's voices and adult voices; the dogma that maintains that every human being has been assigned a particular register from birth, or at least from the moment the voice breaks, that covers no more than around two octaves: soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto for women, and tenor, baritone, and bass for men. The truth is that the natural human voice, freed from all artificial restrictions, is able to embrace all these categories and registers—indeed, it is able to go much further. (qtd. in Newham 64)

Hart, who was perhaps Wolfsohn's greatest protegé, proposed that when one mastered the extended possibilities of vocal production, one could enact a type of "conscious schizophrenia" (qtd. in Kalo et al. 192) that unites facets of the human that are usually dispersed or submerged.

The eight-octave voice is an ideal that signifies the individual's resistance to—and transcendence of—societal and cultural conventions, and in this way it is very

much a part of 1960s Western counterculture. (One suspects that the Roy Hart Theatre was also something of a cult, with Hart as vocal guru.) Davies was intrigued and inspired by Hart's vocal abilities and composed *Eight Songs for a Mad King* to explore the possibilities Hart's extended voice afforded. The extent to which Davies (or librettist Randolph Stow) understood or subscribed to the ideology of the Roy Hart Theatre is unclear, although it is probably not incidental that *Eight Songs* depicts an ostensibly schizophrenic character in the guise of George III, given Hart's own interest in paradigms of schizophrenia in vocal training. Granted, Hart may have been keener to showcase his abilities in *Eight Songs* than to propound an ideology or a way of life; in fact, the late 1960s marked a shift in his career from using voice therapeutically to using it theatrically to stage the "liberated" voice (Pikes 79). Hart was still integral to the development and execution of Davies's work, however, and his voice is a key element to understanding its enigmatic construction.

It is important to note the order of events in which this work was composed. Davies heard Hart sing and learned of his unique vocal abilities. He then wrote *Eight Songs* for Hart, incorporating Hart's vocal techniques into the piece, notating these techniques in a relatively loose fashion. The piece was rehearsed, performed, and possibly amended to suit Hart and to include suggestions that he made. In 1971, two years after the work's first performance, *Eight Songs* was published, and subsequently recorded. Noah Pikes, in an account of the genesis of Roy Hart Theatre, suggests that Hart and Davies had creative disagreements about the nature of the work and about whose work it was, which led to a falling out between them. According to Pikes, Hart disliked being thought of merely as "the vocalist" and largely improvised his part. Davies then notated Hart's improvisations (87–88). The printed score of *Eight Songs* stabilized the work to a certain degree and consolidated Davies's "ownership" of it, although the vocal notation still leaves considerable room for interpretation. The picture that emerges of the nature of the musical collaboration between Davies and Hart resembles that of "double writing" or "double talk," as theorized by Wayne Koestenbaum. In Koestenbaum's formulation, artistic collaboration of this sort may be identified as a "sublimation of erotic entanglement," and the resulting artistic works are distinguished by having an inherently unstable "double voice" or "double signature" (*Double* 3–4). Who, then, authorizes voice in *Eight Songs*? What are the philosophical and theoretical bases of this work's vocality? What is the significance of an artistic work having a doubly (if not multiply) encoded voice?

Steven Connor, in an essay that examines the use of mythic ideas about voice in literary and artistic modernism, writes about the "vocalic uncanny"—moments of

separation, spacing, and distance that may occur within the excursive exercise of the voice. Connor argues that a vocalic uncanny is sounded when voice is held at a distance from itself and its embodiment is highlighted or challenged (as a result of audio technologies, for instance). He writes, "[Whereas] Romantic Orphism subtilizes the voice into song or sonorous power, the vocalic uncanny fixes upon the elements and apparatus of the voice, insisting on its materiality, rather than its power to transform or transfigure the material, or itself to be transfigured" (215). The vocalic uncanny undermines the apparent self-unity and self-presence of voice by marking distance or separation in how voice is received and interpreted. (Think of, for example, the uncanny feeling of hearing one's own recorded voice.) Connor engages the idea of the vocalic uncanny with respect to sound reproduction and telecommunication technology. I suggest that it may also pertain to the performance of extended-voice technique. Davies's vocalist in *Eight Songs* may be thought to instantiate elements of the vocalic uncanny by foregrounding bodily aspects of vocal production, thereby de-familiarizing the human voice. Listening to Davies's *Eight Songs* (live or recorded), one notes the sheer effort required of the vocalist: the fleshy, material reality of vocal production and the bodily resonance that it requires. *Eight Songs* does contain notated overtones, but these are entirely dissimilar to the "head" voice sounds of a work like Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, for instance. The vocal line in *Eight Songs* is overwhelmingly dissonant, harsh, and angular, and it demands to be located in the lower body. Herein lies an interpretive crux with regard to this work. *Eight Songs* instantiates a vocality that is both manifestly present in the body of the singer and distanced from the vocalist: voice flies free, as when the vocalist enters into falsetto in the first song, aping a child, or when he sings as a soprano or sopranist (or possibly a castrato?) in a parody of Handel's "Comfort Ye, My People" from *Messiah*, in the seventh song. Voice is seemingly both there and not there, simultaneously present and absent. It is peculiarly uncanny.

Connor's theory of the vocalic uncanny highlights the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity of voice as a conceptual category, a fact that sometimes goes unrecognized. In attempting to formulate a queer vocality, the recognition that the ontology of voice may be potentially doubled or shadowed is useful, as it undermines assumptions about vocal authenticity and naturalness. Voice is not natural, transparent, or self-present as a matter of course, but is acquired and conditioned, and does particular ideological work. Scholars have yet to undertake what Robert Desjarlais calls an "anthropology of voice": such an enterprise might reveal the ways in which voices shape cultures and vice versa; how voices are policed or manipulated; and how they participate in operations of power (253). Part of the premise of the Wolfsohn/Hart eight-octave voice was that the liberated singer could transcend gender binaries and

sing out the "masculine" and "feminine" parts of the psyche. While we may question the liberating potential of the eight-octave voice and its purported ability to enable one to transcend gender, extended-voice technique does offer an important resistance to the established norms of vocal production and etiquette, and, in doing so, it calls attention to the artificiality and everyday performativity of styles of speaking and singing (e.g., the singing registers of Western art music, or the speaking registers and styles that fit within gender constructions). I suggest that it is the act of revealing the performative and constructed nature of vocality (as opposed to the purportedly transcendental but effectively essentialist myth of the eight-octave voice) that is essential to a conception of queer vocality.

The issue of the relative naturalness or artificiality of voice and vocal ranges has been debated at some length by musicologists, and their work is instructive in the formulation and justification of alternative or queer vocalities. Wayne Koestenbaum has queried the supposed naturalness of singing, suggesting that vocal registers may be interpreted as constructed categories of gender and sexuality, and that "register theory" promotes a duality that may both reflect and inflect distinctions between hetero- and homosexuality (*Queen's* 167). Musicologists have also analyzed the ostensible mismatch between voice and gender presented by the countertenor, and—more drastically, perhaps—by the castrato, noting that these vocalists appear to destabilize the links between voice, sex, and gender, and that the particular vocalities that they represent are socio-culturally and historically determined. Might these vocal types be considered representative—or at least indicative—of a type of queer vocality, or is such a blanket (and arguably ahistorical) pronouncement wrong-headed? Answering this question is, regrettably, outside the scope of this essay; the project of mapping the queer voice is as yet incomplete, if not merely nascent (Madden 28).

Elizabeth Wood has theorized a vocal rubric that is pertinent to this project and helps to outline a queer vocality that qualifies poststructuralist critiques of voice by highlighting voice's material, lived, and political, as well as aesthetic, dimensions. Wood designates "Sapphonics" as a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of "lesbian possibility" for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen. She writes:

> I [. . .] call Sapphonic a particular voice that thrills and excites me. If this trained female singing voice I speak of, an embodied and acoustic instrument, is no longer audible as material sound, it is visible and resonant as presence in historical contexts and imaginary representations that once shaped and projected it. [. . .] I call this voice Sapphonic for its resonance in sonic space as lesbian difference and desire. Its sound is characteristically powerful and problematic, defiant and defective. Its flexible negotiation and integration of an

> exceptional range of registers crosses boundaries among different voice types and their representations to challenge polarities of both gender and sexuality as these are socially—and vocally—constructed. Its refusal of categories and the transgressive risks it takes act seductively on a lesbian listener for whom the singer serves as messenger, her voice as vessel, of desire. (28)

Wood's articulation of Sapphonics opens up an understanding of voice and vocality that complicates heteronormative vocal and musical conventions. Her concept of the Sapphonic voice recalls Roland Barthes's theory of vocal erotics (as outlined in his famous essay "The Grain of the Voice") in its predication on desire as a destabilizing hermeneutic. Wood theorizes a type of vocality that challenges the binary symmetry of gender and sexuality, instead manifesting a type of "transvestic enigma" that crosses borders, synthesizes differences, and vocalizes "inadmissible" sexualities (32–33). Such operations may be regarded as some of the distinguishing features of a queer vocality. Unlike Wood, however, I am unwilling to suggest that recognition or determination of queer vocality is reliant on the sexual identity of the listener; this vocality need not be so prescribed. I would also prioritize the importance of (self-conscious) performativity in the constitution of queer vocality: such vocality may not eradicate or erase social constructions, necessarily, but it may deploy them knowingly or to subversive effect. In *Eight Songs,* Davies's vocalist disrupts categories of vocal utterance by singing otherwise, by *queering* the voice: singing not with the aim of beauty or propriety but out of sheer possibility, or perhaps desperation (of the character, that is, in the vocal representation of madness). Voice is queered in *Eight Songs* by way of extended-voice technique, unusual vocalizations, and performative instability, which collectively contest the supposedly natural connections between sex, gender, identity, voice, pitch, and timbre. In the remainder of this essay, I will offer a close reading/listening of Davies's work in order to justify and interrogate this claim.

When one considers the sheer range of vocal effects that Davies calls for in his score, one begins to appreciate the semiotic complexity that voice acquires in this piece. The vocal line is radically unstable from the beginning, as though the composer were attempting to make it as disjunctive as possible. The vocal line inclines towards (sometimes multi-octave) intervallic leaps, abrupt changes in vocal timbre and articulation, and constant alterations between voiced and "unvoiced" sounds (i.e., breath effects), spoken and sung vocalizations, and single tones and effected overtones. There is no vocal centre, as it were, nothing that necessarily suggests a unified, coherent psychological subject, and hence little for the listener to fix upon in ideational terms. Davies's

score is, as T. Nikki Cesare observes, "choreo/graphic," in that it "stages" extra-musical content by graphic means (422). Davies's score is visually quite innovative, as in the case of the third song, "The Lady in Waiting" (12), in which the staves are set vertically on the page and form a cage-like structure. (In this song, the vocalist has an interchange with the flautist, or "the King's bird.")[2]

Davies's cage-like notation recalls the heart-shaped manuscript of the rondeau "Belle, Bonne, Sage," by the French medieval composer Baude Cordier.[3] The composer employs a variety of markings to denote different vocal effects, including *Sprechgesang*-type X-stems, stems with diamond shapes, zigzags, hexagons, wavy lines, and so on. However, these markings may ultimately suggest the incongruity of any attempt to represent the voice on the page. Despite the visual interest of the score, Davies's markings may point to the inherent failure or impossibility of capturing or pre-determining voice in writing (print), which is why, perhaps, the composer provides *indicative* or *suggestive* vocal notations in the first instance. Vocality, to borrow a line from Judith Butler, is arguably something one *does* rather than (or as much as) something one *has* (25).

Davies's work activates this hypothesis by being gleefully parodic and requiring a host of different vocalizations. The vocalist is variously directed to shriek (4); ululate (7); sing like a child (7); sing nasally like a sheep (9); sing "knifelike" (10); make bird-like sounds (*t-k, t-k, t-k, ch-k, ch-k, ch-k, tu-ka, tu-ka,* etc.) (12); sing "throaty" (12); wheeze (12); sing "inwardly" (13); become all breath (14); ululate like a dog (19); sing "strangled" (20); sing "gasping" (24); sing "nasal, evil" like a drill sergeant (25); sing with an undefined "attitude" (25); sing like an Italian tenor (27); sing like a female vocalist (27); sing in Baroque style (27); sing like a horse (27); sing as a bawling announcer-type (28); sing "silky" (31); declaim factually (32); declaim extremely sanely (33); and finally, howl himself off the stage (33). "Deliver me from my people, they are within," intones the vocalist in the fourth song (16). His "people," in this instance, may be both his imagined jailors, as represented by the onstage musicians, and the cast of characters to whom he gives voice. A few lines later, he claims to be "weary of this feint" and declares, "I am alone," at which point Davies gives the direction "no vib[rato]" (18–19). Is the vocalist, or rather, the character he plays, "himself," unadorned, in this instance? Perhaps. But this moment may also be as false or as unreliable as that in the final movement when he sings "extremely sanely"; the vocalist's utterances are inescapably performative.

The radical vocal fluctuation in *Eight Songs* resembles the vocal experimentation of Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian, except that Davies's work appears to enact a physical *violence* upon the voice; the vocalist of this piece ostensibly tears his voice

apart. Unusual vocalizations are not just explored for their own sake: voice itself is put under duress, under threat, until it, in turn, threatens. Williams observes that Davies's use of extended vocal techniques relates not only to modernist composers like Berio but also to the unorthodox vocal production techniques of fifties rock-and-roll artists and sixties rock musicians like Janis Joplin (80). I would suggest another important precedent for Davies's work: Antonin Artaud's 1947 radio work *Pour en Finir avec le Jugement de Dieu (To Have Done with the Judgment of God),* censored by the French broadcasting authorities until 1972. The British theatrical avant-garde of the late 1960s embraced Artaud's theatre of cruelty, so it is not unlikely that Davies, or at least Hart, had familiarity with Artaud's work in general. Artaud's *Pour en Finir,* a frightening example of the human voice *in extremis,* comprises a series of scream-sounds, glossolalias, throat-gurgles, and other extreme vocalizations. Artaud sought to make human suffering apparent in the voice, articulating a cruel body presence that might make audible the denial of the Other, the heterogeneous. Helga Finter's observations about Artaud's work are also apropos of *Eight Songs:*

> The multiple and polyphonous voices of Artaud cannot be attributed to one decisive sexual characteristic, nor can they be assigned one age or background. A polylogous subject sketches out a sound-space in which the semiotic and polymorphic *jouissance* of a decentred subject is inscribed with an ambient range of more than two octaves by prompted voices. Unbearable at its time, the radio work was probably banned because the subject of which it speaks—the abolition and expulsion of language that asserts itself as a thesis—becomes audible, physically attacking the auditor; that is, it no longer reflects but instead shatters the listener's own voice-mediated imaginary body image. (24)

In the vocalist's performance in *Eight Songs*, one may also intuit the heterogeneous, cruel body presence, although voice also serves character development and other theatrical functions in this work; furthermore, *Eight Songs* is collaborative, whereas Artaud performed his own vocal extremity. The notion of capturing or referencing the Other in the voice is provocative, however, and it touches on a potential listening of Davies's work. Like other listeners, I suspect, I find *Eight Songs* to provide a difficult listening experience, and an unpleasant one for the most part. Some aspect of the unpleasantness of the work, however, and of the vocal line in particular, registers something intriguingly uncanny. Davies's vocalist, in having to scramble through five-plus octaves in various vocal tones (usually grotesque), is stretched—almost fatally—making voice reveal itself, differently and in difference. At the end of the sixth song, "The Counterfeit," the vocalist sings, "If you tell me a lie," in the style of an Italian tenor, and then he shrieks, "let it be a black lie!" fortissimo, and at the highest possible pitch (27).

Davies's exploration (in association with Roy Hart) of vocal alterity in *Eight Songs* queers voice, I suggest, but the extent to which this might be interpreted as a celebration of queer vocality is open to debate. Indeed, one could argue just the opposite: that the use of extended-voice technique in this piece to represent madness suggests that vocal alterity is a freak stylistic that has novelty value, or is useful in depicting extreme psychological states but is otherwise exceptional. As Ruud Welten observes, "Maxwell Davies beats the living *vox humana* out of his king: the shredding of subjectivity is carried out in the vocal event. The king squeaks, shrieks, and sings like an idiot. It is in the very music that the disintegration of the subject is carried out" (22). Furthermore, the implied violence of the vocal utterances of this piece—the way in which the singer is seemingly encouraged to ravage his own voice, as though evoking an Artaudian cruel body presence—may lead one to interpret Davies's vocal writing as evoking a type of *sparagmos* (tearing or ripping apart; ritual death) that has masochistic and sacrificial overtones, perhaps, but that does not validate alternative vocalizations for their own sake. Such an interpretation might posit that the queer vocality of this piece, if it exists, must in fact be punished and excised, which is why Davies's vocalist is made to leave the stage howling.

I am wary of advancing such an interpretation, if only because it overlooks the ambiguous performativity of the work and the sum total of its (arguably) queer aesthetic, which includes gender and genre bending, self-conscious theatricality, and semantically loaded gestures. For example, the awkwardness of its music-theatre genre may be regarded as an index of *Eight Songs*' inability to fit comfortably within existing histories and traditions, an inability that results in its potential to subvert them instead. Similarly, the elements of pastiche in Davies's work—its modes of imitation, impersonation, superficiality, and camp—reference a queer aesthetic that lends this work a dark charm, despite its violent undercurrent. Moreover, the post-structuralist elements of this piece—its deployment of intertextuality, de-centred characterization and *mise en scène,* and vocal abandon—vie with its formalist, modernist elements, a conflict that bespeaks a familiar tension between freedom and order in Davies's oeuvre (McGregor 2). The aesthetic logic of Davies's work is altogether too complex and over-determined to suggest that the work categorically celebrates or condemns the peculiar vocalities that it raises. As Steve Sweeney Turner observes, writing about Davies's 1969 music-theatre work *Vesalii Icones,* "The insistent lack of closure, and the vast array of technical devices which are brought to bear on source materials to ensure an ever-present reversal and displacement of any teleological end, force the piece well out of dialectical territories, and towards the deconstructive field" (183). The open-endedness of *Eight Songs* becomes evident when one examines the

dramatic fiction that it half-sustains and the theatrical frames within which it operates. Without attention to the performative dimension of this work, one cannot hope to assess the significance and potential efficacy of extended-voice technique and vocal alterity. In this, I partially agree with Gabriel Josipovici, who notes that

> [on] record the *Eight Songs for a Mad King* does not really work. The King is too close. His horrifying, uncontrolled deaf man's voice is right there in our ears, inside our heads, and, paradoxically, what happens is that we start to think of the work as merely an expressionist virtuoso piece, with composer and performer squeezing as much violence out of the human voice as they can. One needs the stage, the distance between audience and character; one needs to see the King, small against the giant cages, in order to sense the pathos of his condition. (183)

Voice cannot, in the final instance, be disassociated from embodiment, physicality, and performed actions or gestures. While it may be possible to intuit the body-in-the-voice in an audio recording, Davies's work only acquires its full complexity (and contrariness) when considered as a staged event.

To this end, I wish to examine moments of heightened theatricality in *Eight Songs,* moments in which the composer scripts interactions between the vocalist and the instrumentalists. There are only a few such moments in this piece, but they work to destabilize the performance, turning the musicians into actors of sorts, or possibly representative figments of the central character's imagination. I decline to refer to the vocalist as King George, because this fictive identity is not and cannot be confirmed in the work. After all, the vocalist is the only speaking/singing subject, and he is an unreliable narrator par excellence. Indeed, the indications that this character is supposed to be King George are largely para-textual, in the title of the work and the program note, which leaves open the possibility that this a character who only *thinks* he is "mad" King George. In either case, the vocalist co-opts the instrumentalists into his fantasy world, or he appears to do so. In a note appended to the full score, Davies writes: "Just as the music of the players is always a comment upon and extension of the King's music, so the 'bullfinch' and 'keeper' aspects of the players' roles are physical extensions of this musical process—they are projections stemming from the King's words and music, becoming incarnations of facets of the King's own psyche." The composer proposes that this work is a psychodrama in which everything happens inside the mind of the King character; the onstage musicians are spectres or hallucinations—as interpreted by the King character, at least. Presumably it is more challenging for an audience member to believe that the flautist is a bullfinch, although one

might accept that the protagonist believes this to be the case. The composer adds to the instability of the work by keeping multiple possibilities open, including the possibility that the King figure is merely deluded. (It is not stipulated in the score that the musicians should be encaged.)

In the third song, which is a "dialogue" between the vocalist/the King and the flautist/the King's bullfinch, the flautist is instructed in the score to reply to the King's phrases with "mimicking parodying versions of them, freely" (12), while the percussion player (the King's keeper) intersperses and accompanies with bird-calls, "mocking." The instrumentalists in this piece are not particularly loyal subjects of their King. If anything, they periodically subvert his authority. Or, from a psychodramatic perspective, the players are projections of the protagonist's insecurities, and the King figure subverts his own authority (whence a potentially unlimited semiosis). The semantically and semiotically unstable relationship between the vocalist and the instrumentalists gives this relationship an antagonistic slant. The performers are dependent on one another for establishing their fictional identities, yet these identities remain unstable and contingent.

Eight Songs constantly alternates between a non-traditional concert performance and a semi-staged chamber opera. The various imbalances and alternations reach an apex in the penultimate movement, when the vocalist grabs the instrument belonging to the first violinist, plays on it with "exaggerated pizzicato" and proceeds to break it (30). Even knowing that the instrument has more than likely been discreetly substituted for a cheap model at some earlier point, the action still disrupts the theatrical frames of the performance and stages the transgression of a musical taboo (the breaking of a musical instrument). Williams observes that Davies did not initiate the ritual destruction of musical instruments in performance; this tradition pre-dated *Eight Songs,* and it achieved greater notoriety as the culmination of the performances of rock musicians such as Jimi Hendrix and Pete Townshend. Williams argues that in the context of its time, the act of the destruction of the violin "is not only a ritual violation of the sanctity of music, but a transgression of the intramusical borders between genres of music" (81). Davies writes of this moment that it "is not just the killing of a bullfinch; it is a giving-in to insanity, and a ritual murder by the King of a part of himself, after which, at the beginning of [song] no. 8, he can announce his own death." This announcement is made in the final movement, in which the vocalist speaks in a factual tone in the third person about the death of the King. Like a Brechtian actor or a character in a Pirandello play, the King character distances himself and comments upon his situation from afar. He expresses sympathy for the King—"Poor fellow, I weep for him. He will die howling"—before proceeding to howl

the word *howling* in full range, retreating from the stage, his percussionist/keeper in tow, sounding his death knell (33).

In lieu of the interpretation of this sequence as a "giving-in to insanity," a scenario that renders vocal alterity purely functional and delimits its ideational and subversive potential, I would proffer a reading/hearing of the denouement of this piece that is mindful of the performative instability motivating the entire work. In breaking the violin and in stepping outside himself at the end of this piece, the vocalist/King figure draws attention to the metatheatrical operations of this performance: its artificiality, its contrivance, its status as "play." By refusing to create a stable, coherent diegesis and by allowing the theatrical frame (the oscillations between concert performance and chamber opera peculiar to music theatre) to subvert itself, Davies is forced to cede authorial control. The potential for alternative performance significations may proliferate exponentially. Roy Hart, proponent of a "conscious schizophrenia" attained by mastery of extended-voice technique, allows us to recognize that voice is not a phantom absence or a philosophical abstraction, but instead a malleable instrument that it is socially and culturally conditioned and that can sound out a plethora of potential selves. *Eight Songs* heralds the complex nature of voice as a philosophical category, as a social, cultural, and musical construction, and as a physiological and phenomenological reality. Davies's work composes the voice in flight and under pressure, evoking difference. The vocalist of the piece, in avoiding any single semantic frame, queers voice and makes evident a range of alternative vocalities.

NOTES

1/ *Eight Songs for a Mad King* is available on the following recordings: Unicorn-Kanchana 053068905220; Psappha 1001; Roy Hart Theatre Archives 2003. An audio excerpt of Davies's work is available on the following webpage: <http://www.boosey.com/cr/sample_detail/Peter-Maxwell-Davies-Eight-Songs-for-a-Mad-King-1969/11698>.

2/ All references to the text of *Eight Songs* are to Davies's full score.

3/ I am indebted to Drew Edward Davies for this point.

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