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'The Blue Note' and 'The objectified voice and the vocal object'

MICHEL POIZAT

We publish here, by permission of Cornell University Press, two excerpts from Michel Poizat's L'Opéra, ou le cri de l'ange, *a book that first appeared with the Parisian publisher A. M. Métailié in 1986. The extracts are taken from Arthur Denner's translation, which is due out with Cornell University Press in the spring of 1992 under the title* The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera. *Poizat's book is an 'essay on the jouissance of the opera lover' – an exploration of the experience of being an opera 'fan'. It begins with interviews that the author conducted on the steps of the Paris Opéra in 1985. On the night before the première of Marek Janowski's production of* Tristan und Isolde, *Poizat spoke to some fans devoted enough to wait all night for a standing-room ticket, and asked them what motivated their dedication. In both our extracts, we hear more from these fans – Claude, an art history student, and Renaud, a twenty-one-year-old judo instructor.*

The Blue Note

Claude's description of the emotion that overcame him that evening at Bayreuth perfectly expresses one of the principal characteristics of those supreme moments that the opera fan devotedly seeks out: 'It was *Parsifal*, the end of the Act I ... I cried and *I didn't know why* I was crying ... it wasn't at all realistic: the story wasn't really heart-rending'.

It would be tempting at first glance to explain this outburst of tears by looking at the tragic situations often staged in Opera. That this book began with an evocation of the grief and horror attending these instants surely comes as no surprise if we recall that the normal condition of the operatic stage is to be strewn with bodies and crossed in endless procession by characters torn apart by love or hate. But such an explanation does not hold: the dramatic situation counts for nothing in the outbreak of emotion; what is more – and this is a theme that will be developed later – one of the primordial conditions for the occurrence of this emotional upheaval resides in the destruction of meaning. This is what underlies Claude's statement that: 'Music is something I can't seem to categorise. Whereas the theatre ... works on other centres, with music ... you ask yourself ... "what's happening to me?" '; it is what underlies Renaud's comments about *Madama Butterfly*: 'it's idiotic[1] ... when Callas sings, when she's going to kill herself, maybe it's idiotic, but I snap'. Question: 'Do you think that's because you know she is going to kill herself?' Renaud: 'No, no, it's hearing the voice,

[1] Note this repeated reference to something not making sense, to something that cannot be mastered ('what's happening to me?' ... 'It's idiotic'), which signals a failure of the signifying order.

the music, I fall to my knees.' In fact the opera fan knows first hand that this emotion, far from being diffused throughout the tragic situation or scene, occurs as an acute, irrepressible irruption linked to specific musical passages in which all that is visual and all that belongs to the register of signification fails and falls away. In these instants pure voice alone persists. Moments devoid of tragic or even nostalgic import, certain melodies of Mozart, for example, can produce this emotion; or it can be provoked by a single leitmotif – indeed, the workings of leitmotif in Wagner present a striking case in point – irrespective of its dramatic context, whether of joyous exaltation at the end of the Act II love duet of *Tristan und Isolde*, or of tragic rapture in Isolde's final Transfiguration.

Yet to speak of a falling away, or failure, of the visual order may seem paradoxical, because no stage presentation draws more heavily on visual elements than opera.[2] The various devices of the *mise-en-scène*, such as costumes and scenery, complex, mechanically driven special effects and visual illusions such as *trompe l'œil* and perspective, have been fundamental in opera since its beginnings in the seventeenth century. It should not be forgotten that Opera as we know it was born with the Baroque period, an era with a penchant for *trompe l'œil* and perspective effects which the emergent form of lyric art immediately used to great scenic advantage. Joseph Losey offers a remarkable illustration of this in his choice of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza as the location for an important scene in his film of *Don Giovanni*: what better setting for Don Giovanni, 'el burlador', the trickster of Seville, than the *trompe-l'œil* masterpiece that is the backdrop of this theatre.

This visual saturation and illusory recreation of an architectural space means that the onstage staircase is particularly useful in arranging and regulating the visual aspects of opera. Indeed, the history and role of the staircase in operatic stage direction would make a very interesting little study of its own. It remains a favoured device of visual dramaturgy in countless productions. In Patrice Chéreau's production of *Lulu* (sets by Richard Peduzzi), use of the staircase seems to have been brought to perfection: at the end of Act III, Jack the Ripper slowly ascended the immense staircase connecting the lower depths where the murder had just been committed to a point of utter emptiness marked by the pale eye of the moon. Similar visual effects were achieved, though in an entirely different style, through massive deployment of supernumeraries on the colossal pyramidal stairs of the set for *Aida* in the Palais Omnisports production at Bercy in 1984 (stage direction and sets by V. Rossi): neither orchestra nor singers could be heard above the spectators' applause at Radames' triumphant entrance (a stellar moment in itself!). On the other hand, a *mise-en-scène* can deliberately obstruct this immediacy, this 'making-present', through the *trompe-l'œil* perspective effect of a point of emptiness, a point around which important moments of the action are organised. For example, in Mozart's *Lucio Silla* (stage direction by Patrice Chéreau, sets by Richard Peduzzi; Nanterre, 1985), a stage wall completely obstructed the scene, destroying all depth and perspective; yet never had the presence of emptiness

[2] The sale or on-site rental of opera glasses is an indication of the importance of the visual, even if the binoculars tended originally to be trained more often on the audience than on the stage.

been manifested so forcefully as when at certain key moments that wall opened to allow a glimpse of blackness, non-being, nothingness.

It is apparent here that the visual aspects of opera go far beyond anecdotal elements of sets and costumes to touch on the very foundations of art. As Lacan has said: 'All art is characterised by a certain mode of organisation around [a] void.'[3]

That being said, there is something inescapably paradoxical about opera: producers sink enormous sums of money into effects such as these, creating sumptuous sets and costumes only to have the spectators, in those great moments, close their eyes to the display, the better to be ravished by the singing of the Diva. The collapse of the visual order in these instants, or its transfiguration under the alluring influence of voice and music,[4] is not a secondary or accessory phenomenon of the genre. Quite the contrary, it is in a certain sense constitutive of opera. The radical autonomisation of the voice, its transformation into a detached object that lays claim to the listener's entire receptivity, has made possible the very establishment of the apparatus that is opera. The frequent and at times systematic incongruity of voice, role and physical appearance in the singer – everything that we call operatic convention – is tolerable only because the spectator's perception of this incongruity dissolves in the moment the singer's lyric flight stimulates the spectator's jouissance. I have in mind here not only the Castafiore who 'laugh to find themselves so beautiful in this mirror', but the entire initial history of Opera, in which concern over the fit between voice and character simply never arose: soprano voices, castrato voices for the most part, were assigned to eminently virile roles, like those of Caesar, Xerxes and many other figures of masculine power. The only fit required was that the performer's vocal power be equal to the importance of the role. The fascination that the castrato voice aroused (and arouses to this day, if attempts to recover or approximate it are any indication) is well known. Therefore, what determined the distribution of vocal parts among the characters was an aesthetic scale of values. This remains true, moreover, through the subsequent development of the genre, notwithstanding the fact that from the end of the eighteenth century the sexual aspect of a role was usually taken into account. The soprano voice was thus assigned to the female protagonist, the tenor voice to the male protagonist. The question remains of course as to what the governing scale of values is founded upon and, particularly, why the highest voices, whether female (soprano) or male (tenor), are valued the most.

We should return to the pre-eminence of the vocal and musical aspects in opera, as this pre-eminence can help account both for the existence of a substantial industry devoted to opera recording, and for the proliferation of opera performances in concert version. However questionable such low-budget productions may be, especially when they deliberately go against the artistic intentions of the composer (as for example with Wagner, who conceived of opera as above all a dramaturgic

[3] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris, 1986), 155.

[4] Remember what Claude said about the singer whom he had thought ugly: 'and when I heard her sing, I didn't say "she sings well", I said "she's beautiful" '.

form), they remain a possible alternative and manage to preserve a large portion of what makes the works interesting.[5] The ease with which the Palais Garnier administration continues to sell obstructed views is further proof of the autonomy of the vocal and musical dimensions of opera, as is, on another level, the behaviour of fans who make and collect pirate recordings.

What drives the itinerant opera devotee is the desire for vocal and musical moments, never visual ones. The fan will cross the continent to hear a certain singer in a particular role, not even pausing to consider who the director of the production might be; but he will never go to such lengths to see a particular director without considering the work being staged and the singers scheduled to perform it. And when these moments occur, the fan will seek to preserve an objective – if paltry – trace in the form of a cassette recording made on a bargain basement pocket tape recorder smuggled into the hall in a shopping bag. This cassette will sometimes preserve a small treasure: the night the Diva transcended her role, or else, much as a postage stamp endowed with a rare defect has great value for the collector, the instant when she fell in stature by tripping on her high C. This collector's attitude is a fair indication of the extent to which the voice assumes the status of object in the fan's mind. For it is insofar as the voice is indeed an object, an autonomous object detached from the body producing it, that it can become the object of the fan's jouissance. And yet this object is fragile and evanescent. It exists only as long as it eludes. No tape recorder, however technologically advanced, can fully capture and reproduce it. This explains the endless repetition of the fan's reinvestment. It also explains the audience's violence towards a singer who falters. The mission of the artist on stage is, in a certain sense, to approach self-annihilation as a subject in order to offer herself as pure voice. The success of this process is the very condition for the dissolution of incongruity between singer and role, a dissolution which, as I have suggested, is at the foundation of the lyric arts. But when the singer fails in her mission, when she somehow reaffirms her existence not merely as a subject, but as a *failing* subject, the spectator has to face that incongruity once again. Opera cannot bear up under these conditions and founders into the risible and the ridiculous. It is highly significant that in these circumstances the public casts the singer back into the position of object; but now she is a fallen object, a piece of refuse, to be greeted in kind with the rotten egg or ripe tomato or, as is fortunately more common, with the vocal stand-in for refuse: booing and catcalls. This retribution for disgrace is always rather impressive: if observed from the outside, it occurs with a violence, not to say shocking hatred, utterly disproportionate to the stakes involved. After all, how important can it be that a singer bungles a note supposed to last no longer than a few tenths of a second in the course of a performance often more than three hours long? The singer is not an aerialist who comes crashing into a net if she finds herself a quarter of a second too late for the rendezvous with her partner! And yet the audience reaction is in some ways more fearsome for the singer than for the stumbling acrobat. It is as if the fan feels deprived

[5] As Claude pointed out, the image can sometimes be 'optional'.

of what he was awaiting with such fervour: an instant of absolute ecstasy in the fantasy of finally possessing the inaccessible object of his quest. It is as if a fundamental encounter has been missed, and all on account of the singer, who thus becomes a scapegoat. This explains the aggression of the spectator, as well as the extreme violence that overcomes him when the fault lies with a fellow spectator sitting close by, who happens to disturb one of these supreme moments with an inopportune noise. The penalty is summary execution: the offender is shot down with dirty looks.

If we can speak of the failure, the falling away of the visual order at the supreme instants of Opera, we can also speak of the falling away of the entire signifying order. Literally. Every opera lover, I think, knows first hand the experience of the libretto falling out of his hands: you are listening to a recording of your favourite opera, seated comfortably at home, libretto in hand so as to follow better the subtleties of inflection, the expressivity of the interpretation. Inevitably, if the work is beautiful and the interpretation good, certain passages will wrest your attention from the printed words: you lean back in your chair and lose yourself in listening, oblivious for all the world to the printed text. It is then that the libretto drops out of your hands. The attitude is in conflict with your original project of listening attentively to the verbal exchange, as it is precisely at these powerful moments, when the singer's expressive qualities and the meaning of the words ought to come together in the deepest sense, that you should be most attentive to the literary text. Yet somehow you feel a radical antagonism between letting yourself be swept away by the emotion and applying yourself to the meaning of each word as it is sung. You must choose; and if for example the demands of scholarship make it essential that you follow the text word for word, you can do so only at great expense in terms of concentrated effort and lost jouissance. It is not merely that textual intelligibility and meaningful comprehension fail to contribute to the production of emotion; in fact, they ultimately limit it or even cancel it altogether. [...]

It is with instants such as these that we are concerned: instants when singing, particularly the singing of a woman, deliberately presents itself as singing, as pure music free of all ties to speech; singing which literally destroys speech in pursuit of a purely musical melody, a melody that develops little by little until it verges on the cry. In instants such as these, when language disappears and is gradually superseded by the cry, an emotion arises which is expressible only by the irruption of something that signals the feeling of absolute loss, by the sob; finally a point is reached where the listener himself is stripped of all possibility of speech.[6]

[6] Of course, these emotional moments are not confined to great lyricism: each of us, like Renaud, can cite a few bars, vocal or instrumental, that have the power to stir us to the depths of our soul every time we hear them. Each of us must look to his own historical unconscious for the roots of the specific impact of these passages. None the less, what happens in the aria or in the lyrical development associated with it is so profound and general as to have itself been constitutive of an art as well as to have determined its evolution. It is also clear that this rare and intense jouissance is never provoked by recitatives (which is why opera recordings sometimes dispense with them altogether).

The two excerpts from *Tristan* mentioned earlier, the end of the Act II love duet and Isolde's Transfiguration, illustrate this idea in a striking way.

These momentous instants in *Tristan* are anything but isolated cases; they seem rather to exemplify the deep workings of all great operatic arias, for in these two passages one can discern in its purest and most perfect form the very project that every great aria undertakes – the positioning of a supreme culmination point. In this sense, Wagner is not so much a musical innovator as a composer who draws forth not *the* truth – for it is never unequivocal – but at least one or another of Opera's multiple truths. This perhaps explains why discussions of opera inevitably end up with Wagner. Let there be no mistake: I do not say that the other great composers fail to articulate this truth: were that the case, their works would not have survived the test of time. But in Wagner – and later in Berg – a culmination, a purification occurs in which this truth is unveiled. Again, let there be no mistake: the truth to be found in Wagner derives neither from his writings nor his theories; it comes from his music. His writings do of course tell us something of this truth, though only by protesting too much: Wagner's music often contradicts his own theories. Let us return to *Tristan und Isolde*, to the love duet and Isolde's Transfiguration.

In listening to these passages, something irrepressible takes place in those of us sensitive to the music: the words, even if one understands them, even if one knows them by heart, quickly lose all their meaning. The listener is swept away by the spiralling melodic ascent, by the *presentiment* (a kind of *call*) of a culmination point yet to come, one that eventually bursts forth as a musical cry in Isolde's Transfiguration, and, in the love duet, as sheer cry, the cry of surprise and betrayal uttered by Brangæne at the arrival of King Marke.

It is important here to develop a little further this presentiment or anticipation. It constitutes a site of particular intensity in which a link forged between the desire of the composer and the desire of the listener forms the basis for the very existence of musical art. Taking up the term used by Chopin, who gave the name Blue Note to the note that crystallises this effect,[7] Alain Didier-Weill writes:

> The particular way in which the Blue Note is articulated with its diachronic neighbours merits attention. If you listen, for example, to a truly inspired jazz improvisation, you cannot help being struck by the fact that the string of notes that has you enthralled leads inevitably, whatever the progression, towards a determinate point, and that these notes are – it can be said without exaggeration – the point's pre-sentiment. If the point where meaning explodes, the point of temporal rupture that defines the Blue Note, is thus in some way announced by the notes that precede it, may we not postulate – by opposition to deferred action, which Lacan finds in articulate discourse – a proleptic effect specific to the discourse of music? In this sense, the Blue Note is not what ultimately and retroactively gives meaning to the beginning of the musical phrase: rather, it comes as the fulfilment of the promise posited by the discourse preceding it. The Blue Note is the continuation, it might be said, of the knowledge presupposed by the diachronic line.

[7] The 'Blue Note' in this instance is not to be confused with the blue note or 'inflected' pitch in jazz and the blues.

If musical improvisation is compared to architecture, then the improvisation is supported by a master-beam that is not yet in place, is still to come.

Everything in the improvisation[8] occurs as though the creator were reaching towards this master-beam or, more precisely, as though he were called by it and merely answered its call. The attraction of this formulation is that it makes us feel that the musician must recognise the path that will lead him to the precise point of self-annihilation. This is a pre-existing point, but one whose pre-existence, paradoxically, the musician has himself engendered; it is as though, having planted the seeds of an existence yet to come, he creates in the listener a form of waiting that has all the earmarks of what can only be called hope: hope for the fulfilment of a promise to which he as a creator is passionately committed: 'I recognise that, given what I am now putting before you, you have the right to expect that I will find this entity whose existence I give you reason to presuppose: the Blue Note.'

... The Blue Note not only leads into the jouissance that this note itself will provide; like the preliminary pleasure of amorous foreplay, it also brings us a promise of jouissance.[9]

In Opera, then, everything happens as though the proleptic effect described above applies itself to something that will tend further and further towards a supreme mark of the failure of speech and the signifying order, namely, the cry.

The objectified voice and the vocal object

To speak of jouissance is to speak of the enjoyment of property, of an object (the legal usage of the term should be kept in mind[10]), and when one speaks of a quest, the idea of a search for a lost object is understood. It is now time to try to understand how the voice may transmute into this object in which jouissance is sought, and how this object is constructed as lost, thereby sustaining the errant quest that aims at its recovery.

Many expressions in everyday language, many literary, mythical or artistic examples, refer directly to this object-like consistency that the voice can assume, particularly in its singular propensity to be lost, stolen or broken. By objectifying the voice in this way, the human imaginary has constructed an entity that evokes specific features of the vocal object in the strict sense of the word, as psychoanalysis strives to conceptualise it.

The lost voice

The voice, by definition, is something that is lost: it may be lost in the distance, in an uproar. Everyone loses it under the impact of emotion, in moments of amazement ('I was dumbstruck'), particularly when this is caused by the voice

[8] And by extension, in any musical creation. Poised before his empty staves, what does the composer do if not improvise? The composer merely has the additional advantage of being able to revise.

[9] Alain Didier-Weill, 'Quatre temps subjectivants dans la musique', *Ornicar?*, 8 (1976–7).

[10] In legal discourse, the French *jouissance* and English 'enjoyment' are precise equivalents, in such expressions as *avoir la propriété et la jouissance des biens et droits*, 'to have the ownership and enjoyment of properties and rights' [translator's note].

of the Other. Remember what Claude said about great moments of emotion: 'you want to shout "Bravo" ... the "bra ..." comes out but the "... vo" won't come'. The singer can also lose her voice. This is her most haunting obsession.

'There are no great voices these days', runs the oft-heard complaint. Nothing in opera criticism is more commonly repeated than reference to vanished, irreplaceable voices. Judgements affirming the decline of the art of singing are heard just as often:

'If so many singers were not convinced that they had no further need to study, we would not have so few good artists and so many bad ones.' 'What a wonderful century this is, in which many singers are paid dearly to sing badly.'

'It seems that there is at present a scarcity of good teachers in Italy ... who help to keep the tottering profession from falling from its present decadence into complete ruin.' '[The great singers of the past] will tell you frankly and convincingly ... that today, no one sings well.'

'To contemplate the decline of an art is to be filled with great sadness.'

Contemporary reflections? Apart from the last quotation, which dates from 1874, the source of all these comments is Pier Francesco Tosi's, *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato*,[11] written in 1723, in other words, at a time that appears in hindsight as the heyday of Baroque bel canto. Today, opera criticism laments the Flagstads, the Melchiors, the Thills and Lubins. In a few decades, perhaps, it will be the Caballés, Joneses, Pavarottis and Domingos of the '80s who will be missed. There are no great voices, no great singers, except those who belong to the past; a voice needs to have been lost in order to acquire the stamp of an idealisation that imbues it with the nostalgia of a golden age gone forever. Maria Callas is today held in nearly unanimous adulation; in her lifetime, however, she was the object of the most brutal criticism.

The castrato voice is certainly not alone in drawing a large part of its *current* fascination from the fact (apart from its strangeness, its monstrosity, even) that it is a voice lost forever, a voice to which access has been proscribed, depriving us of any point of reference that might provide some way of approximating it (the wretched recording made by the last castrato will not suffice as a basis for reconstruction). But there is every reason to expect that attempts to yield something that might once more conjure up its echo will continue.

Naturally, the voice is not alone in being subject to nostalgic idealisation, but it is, by virtue of its evanescence, its intangibility, so susceptible to this idealisation that – not very long ago, all things considered – the implacable desire to capture this immateriality led mankind to invent the phonograph and the tape recorder. But we must not forget that, however advanced this technology is or may become, what the opera lover ultimately preserves in the precious recordings of his idolised Diva is degraded residue. Consider, in passing, the curious destiny

[11] English translation under the title *Observations on the Florid Song*, trans. J. E. Gaillard (1743; rpt. London, 1926); the 1874 French translation by Théophile Lemaire is entitled *L'Art du chant*. The last quotation is Lemaire's footnote on the state of contemporary singing in France.

of the word 'cassette': after having designated in French 'a small casket designed to preserve papers and *precious* objects' or 'a sovereign's private *treasure*' (*Larousse de la Langue française),* it passed out of common usage until modern technology reinvested it in its function of preserving precious and royal objects: voices and sounds.

The stolen voice

The film *Diva*, by J. J. Beneix, illustrates in a particularly pertinent – if entirely incidental – way the theme of the objectified voice (a term which, it should be emphasised, is not to be confused with the vocal object in the stricter sense that will be developed later on). But what story does this film tell? Its point of departure is a singer's refusal to consent to her voice being recorded. Attempts to 'steal' or 'pirate' the voice start to multiply, their primary goal being to insert this object into a network of commodity values to which the recording industry has made us all accustomed. A young fan accomplishes the theft, not for venal considerations but with the aim of amorous appropriation. His recording then becomes coveted by those who seek to exploit the treasure for financial gain. The convolutions of the plot soon collapse this first circuit, in which the recording of the Diva's voice is the object of pursuit, into another, entirely different network, which involves the circulation, also in the form of a cassette tape, of the voice of a prostitute indicting the-political-bigwig-with-links-to-organised-crime, who in turn seeks to destroy both the incriminating testimony and anyone who has learnt of its existence. The two pursuits eventually intersect, interpenetrate and interfere with each other in and around the same apparent object: 'the' cassette, which for some is the voice of the Diva, for others that of a whore.

The ensuing events are dangerous, particularly for Jules, the young protagonist, caught in the deadly trap of having identified, of knowing this reified voice. By being detached and reified in the form of a residue, prized by some, vilified by others, the voice is of course able to inspire quest or even conquest (the fantasy of possessing the elusive treasure is determined by this reification); but it becomes a trove of *illusions* to the extent that it engenders a misunderstanding [a *mal-entendu*, literally a mis-hearing – trans.], for, in fact, it is always around some other thing that the protagonists' activities and lethal games revolve. The stakes of this pursuit may sometimes be high: indeed, as the following example will demonstrate, they may be death or madness.

The broken voice

'Her voice – her voice! They have broken her voice! A curse be upon them!' And he disappears through the door ... At once, a tremendous explosion shakes the whole plateau. Sheaves of flame leap to the clouds, and an avalanche of stones falls on the Vulkan road.

Of the bastions, the curtain-wall, the donjon, the chapel of the Carpathian Castle, there remains nothing but a mass of smoking ruins scattered over the Orgall plateau. ...

The last words of La Stilla's song alone escaped from his lips, —
'Innamorata – mio cuore tremante . . .'
Franz de Télek was mad![12]

Jules Verne's novel *The Carpathian Castle* is another illustration of what can happen to the fantasy that dooms a subject to seek possession of the objectified voice: 'But her voice – her voice shall stay with me! . . . Her voice is mine! . . . It is mine alone, and shall never belong to another.'[13]

The Carpathian Castle is the story of a young Romanian count, Franz de Télek, smitten with love for a Neapolitan soprano, La Stilla, a figure of absolute beauty and vocal perfection. Each evening Franz attends a concert given by his beloved. But he is not alone in this display of devotion: also at the theatre is Baron Rodolphe de Gortz, an enigmatic, disturbing presence: 'Baron de Gortz sat at the back of his box, absorbed in this exquisite song, impregnated with this divine voice, without which he seemed unable to live.'[14]

La Stilla is eventually overcome by this presence: 'Although she could not see him in the depths of his box, she knew he was there, she felt his look imperiously fixed upon her, and she was so greatly troubled by his presence that she no longer heard the applause with which the public welcomed her appearance on stage.'[15] She is finally so troubled by this silent intrusion that she decides to give up opera altogether and accept Franz de Télek's hand in marriage. A farewell performance is arranged at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Suddenly, towards the end of the concert, she stops singing: Baron de Gortz's face, 'that ecstatic face, frightful in its pallor', appears in the light for the first time, over the railing of his box; it terrifies her: 'An inexplicable alarm paralyses her . . . She puts her hand to her mouth, which is stained with her blood . . . She staggers . . . She falls . . .'[16] She is dead.

In an attempt to forget his tragedy, Franz de Télek leaves Naples. On his travels, he meets Baron de Gortz, who has shut himself away in the Carpathian Castle to savour in solitude La Stilla's voice, which, along with her image, he had contrived, thanks to the technological genius of his faithful assistant Orfanik, to steal from her as she gave her last concert. Franz becomes the 'delirious witness' to a session during which the Baron treats himself to a performance of that voice and that image:

Franz, too, stood intoxicated with the charm of this voice which he had not heard for five long years . . . He was wrapped in the ardent contemplation of this woman whom he had thought he should never see again, and who was there, alive, as if some miracle has resuscitated her before his eyes!

. . . Yes! He could recognise the finale of the tragic scene in *Orlando*, the finale in which the singer's heart is broken on this last phrase:

[12] Jules Verne, *Le Château des Carpathes*, trans. as *The Carpathian Castle*, ed. I. O. Evans (1963; rpt. London, 1979), 182–4.
[13] Verne, 181.
[14] Verne, 112.
[15] Verne, 111.
[16] Verne, 116.

'Innamorata ... voglio morire'.

...

But the voice is beginning to fail. It seemed as though La Stilla were hesitating as she repeated those words of poignant grief, –

'Voglio mo ...'

Would she fall on this stage as she had done on that other?

She does not fall, but her song is stopped on the very same note as it had done at the San Carlo ... *She utters a cry, and it is that same cry* which Franz had heard on that very night ...[17]

In the course of the ensuing confrontation, the Baron demonstrates to Franz the illusory nature of the scene by sacrificing its image: he breaks the set of mirrors used in the visual apparatus, as if to signify that the loss of the beloved's image is an easy grief to bear. But in the final struggle, 'a bullet shatters the box he carries in his arms. He utters a terrible cry. "Her voice – her voice! They have broken her voice!"' The story ends with the cataclysm which began this subchapter.

However paroxysmal these events, they are sure to 'speak' to those who love to record music; they will recall the genuine, overpowering anguish of recording a live broadcast, the anguish of knowing that it will be impossible to recover the original moment if the recording goes awry, of the thought that an interruption in transmission or a defect in the recording material might squander the opportunity. These events will also speak to all who, through their own fault or the fault of another (in which case it is best not to be this other), have felt that genuine sensation of death when one of these by-definition unique recordings is lost or erased. Longstanding friendships have perished through such mistakes.[18]

The vocal object

When psychoanalysis speaks of the vocal object, however, it is not referring to these 'reified' forms the voice can take, however useful they may be to illustrate certain properties of the voice as object. What psychoanalysis describes is something else, a process within each individual, a process by which the voice is constituted as an object, an object of a drive, and thereby is lost from the very outset, independent of any reification into a tangible object of 'reality', in the way that term is usually understood.

And if many things are bound together around this question, which in many individuals underlies investments every bit as strong, for example, as the quest for the sexual object, it is because the process whereby the voice is elaborated as an object dialecticises an entire relationship with the Other, with the desire

[17] Verne, 179–80. Incidentally, the cry does not figure in the initial description of La Stilla's death; it is as though Jules Verne invented this cry when he came to describe hearing the recorded and thus objectified voice.

[18] If Jules Verne 'invents' the tape recorder and even the video here, he is none the less not the first to have fantasised the voice as a detached object: Rabelais had already imagined words that froze as they left the mouths of those who ventured into frigid lands and that could subsequently be heard in the air when freed from their icy solidity by a thawing ray of sunlight or the warmth of the hand.

of the Other; in this respect, the vocal object occupies a fundamental place in the structuration of any subject, in precisely the same way and according to the same problematics as the other, more familiar objects of psychoanalysis: the oral, anal and genital. Freud spoke only of these last three. It was Lacan who further identified the voice and the gaze as objects of a drive. But it is to the model presented by Freud in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* that I will refer in attempting to explain how the establishment of the vocal object in the subject is to be understood, and how this object is from the outset established as lost. I describe my explanation as an attempt because nothing is more hypothetical than the formulation that will follow, particularly by virtue of the way in which this phenomenon functions as deferred action.[19]

Speaking earlier of the 'Blue Note', I referred to a 'proleptic' effect. Psychoanalysis concerns itself much more frequently with 'deferred' actions: the rearrangement of psychic material situated logically and chronologically before other material under the *action* of this second material. This rearrangement may extend to the pure and simple invention of the first situation, which then becomes mythical, a necessary postulate, independent of its actual locatable existence; this enables the situation to account for what occurs in an individual following the appearance and under the action of this second material, which alone is accessible to verifiable experience.

This occurs with the vocal object. But how?

Let us first set forth a postulate, even if this postulate is only the hypothesis necessary to support a construction based on what can be observed and analysed, the hypothesis itself escaping direct observation in the presupposed original situation. This initial postulate is that: at the beginning of his existence, under the pressure of an endogenous tension, the baby, the 'in-fans',[20] marked by the prematurity characteristic of the human species (which makes him entirely dependent on the Other for the satisfaction of his needs), gives out a cry. It is not important whether this 'first' cry is 'the' first or some other cry – as we shall see, this 'first' cry is mythical or at all events hypothetical. What is important is that this cry is a pure manifestation of vocal sonority linked to a state of internal displeasure, and that this cry is answered by the Other (who may be and in fact usually is the mother, though it could be any other person), who, on the one hand, *attributes* meaning to this cry, *interprets* it as the sign of hunger, thirst, etc., and, on the other hand, brings something to the baby, thereby procuring for him, by appeasing the tension that incited the cry, a first satisfaction.

A trace of this first satisfaction will remain in the child's psyche and be associated with a trace of all the elements – whether feeding, physical contact, sonorous stimulation or some combination of these elements – that bring about the discharge of internal tension. The child will thereafter have a representation of this object – or group of objects – of first jouissance. In the same way, these mnemonic

[19] I draw directly on formulations of the psychoanalyst Gérard Pommier in a France-Culture broadcast of 24 May 1984 ('La voix') and in a France-Musique broadcast of 2 March 1984 ('Psychanalyse et musique').

[20] Infant: from the Latin 'in-fans', one unable to speak.

traces will be associated with another mnemonic trace, that of the resonance of his own cry, or in other words what surrounded the initial state of displeasure.

It must be understood that at this stage the 'first' cry is not *a priori* a call, much less a demand; it is a simple vocal expression of discomfort. It is the Other, say the mother, who in attributing meaning to the cry raises it to the status of a demand and in so doing inscribes it with the mark of her own desire ('What does my baby want?' she says to her child, behind which sentence several others can be made out, such as: 'What do I want you to want?', 'To leave me in peace, or to have me pay attention to you?'[21]) In extremely schematic terms, the nature and modality of the mother's 'response'[22] can vary enormously and depends on the position occupied by the child in relation to her own desire, on whether or not she desired this child.

This first, pure cry is qualified as mythical or hypothetical because as soon as it is interpreted and elicits a reaction, its original 'purity' is lost forever, caught up within the system of signification that is already in place with the intervention of the Other. From the standpoint of experience, there is only this state of the 'demanding cry'; as soon as the cry is uttered, its initial state of 'sonorous purity' has disappeared forever.

But then comes a second phase, the phase that opens when the baby, once more subject to some pressing need, again cries out. With this second cry, everything is different: it is not a repetition of the first situation, because the second cry is inserted into a network of meanings emanating from the Other, a dialectic marked by the desire of the Other. With this second phase, the cry – however 'pure' it was before – becomes a cry 'for', for someone, for something. It is no longer simple vocal expression but demand, a demand for the return of the object linked to the initial jouissance; the cry has once and for all attained the status of 'speech' and 'meaning'. Now, when another object is brought to the child to appease his tension, this second object or series of objects will never be identical to the first, if only because it is inserted into a situation that can no longer be the same by virtue of the traces left by the first situation. The first object of jouissance can therefore never be recovered in an identical form: it is irremediably lost. As everyone knows, a number of months of development are necessary before the child reaches the stage in which he recognises the identity of a given object in varied situations.

The voice set into play during this first experience of jouissance may be the child's, or it may be that of his mother; the important thing is the voice, in its simple sonorous materiality. The search for this sonorous materiality becomes explicable, then, in that as sonorous materiality it is already lost, once this second phase begins, behind the signification attributed to it by the Other and through its failure to be recognised as identical with the first object of jouissance. The latter assumes the value of a paradise lost. The child is literally 'dispossessed'[23]

[21] The word 'want' in this instance should not be interpreted as a matter of conscious volition.

[22] The term 'response' is of course inappropriate because, properly speaking, no 'demand' has actually been made.

[23] Pommier, 'La voix' and 'Psychanalyse et musique' (see n. 19).

of his cry as simple, vocal, sonorous material because the cry only *exists*, at least from the standpoint of having an effect, if and when the Other ceases to consider it as pure, gratuitous (or even ludic) vocal emission, when she inscribes it in the signifying order, assigns it a meaning and alleviates the child's displeasure by offering him her breast, by changing his nappy, or by singing him a song.

> The voice in itself, its materiality, has for an instant functioned much in the same way as a bird-call ... attracting and exacting a response, an interpretation by the mother. This compression of the cry through its signification has a divisive effect in which the sound acquires the status of signifier. It leaves behind something useless (from the point of view of signification) – the skeletal remains of its sonorous materiality. This residue is meaningless, it has to do with the lost object, the Freudian object that Lacan has designated as *objet petit a*,[24] in view of its lack of meaning.[25]

It is thus around this construction that the entire relationship of the child with the Other[26] is set into place, that his whole relationship to language is established.

Another example, one drawn from the everyday experience of speaking, can help us better understand how vocal materiality is lost behind signification. Whenever someone speaks to us, the strictly sonorous aspect of the utterance tends to disappear behind the meaning of what is being said. A perfectly bilingual person may find himself completely incapable, after having seen a film, of telling you whether he saw the original or the dubbed version, especially if asked the question some time after the screening, after the pure sonority of the language of the soundtrack has left him. On the other hand, he will have no trouble recalling which version he saw if a bad dubbing, for example, called attention to the specifically sonorous dimension by failing to reproduce the ambient resonance of the original sound, or through any other such disruption as the film unfolded.

An analogous phenomenon occurs with accent in language and the dimension of jouissance that an accent can open up. Why is it that a regional accent, when heard outside its own region and thus with that odd aura of foreignness, tends to elicit laughter or value judgements (this charming lilt, that broad drawl, etc.)? Is it that accents evoke social or ethnic differences and the hierarchical values assigned to them? Probably. Yet it is also because the accent tends to bring to the surface vocal materiality, the vocal object as such; it becomes – as we have seen – an object of jouissance, and this intrusion of jouissance into language subverts the signifying action of the spoken words.

An effect of this sort has undoubtedly led to the near universal exclusion of regional accents from the national broadcast media: national network radio and television announcers must have no accent – it is understood that the absence of accent is defined by the dominant accent – especially on news programmes or in any other area where it is felt, correctly or incorrectly, that the meaning

[24] Lacan insisted that the term not be translated. For further explanation, see Alan Sheridan's note in his translation of Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), xi.

[25] Gérard Pommier, *D'une logique de la psychose* (Paris, 1982), 40.

[26] In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud calls this relationship one of 'mutual comprehension'.

of what is said is more important than how it is said. From this standpoint, whatever might interfere with meaning is necessarily proscribed, beginning with the reintroduction of vocal materiality and the jouissance connected to it.

With this last example the question of jouissance as it relates to the vocal object reappears. For the vocal object at the first, hypothetical phase described above is indeed an object of jouissance. Thereafter, the relationship to sonorous materiality will involve jouissance. The voice as object is constructed both as lost object and as first object of jouissance. It is not surprising that this engenders a *quest* for the object, a search for lost sonorous materiality, now dissolved behind signification.

It is important to note, however, that what is sought is not sonorous materiality in itself, but rather sonorous materiality as it frees itself from the domination of signification through a process of purification or expurgation that is never attained except at the asymptote of silence. In this way it becomes possible to understand the basis for the antagonism between meaning and vocal object, an antagonism identified earlier not analytically but phenomenologically, in the emotion felt by the opera fan.

Nor is it surprising to see this quest advance into the cry and silence, regions furthest from the dominion of signification, for both cry and silence lie at the edge of this 'lost' paradise. The futility of the search can also be understood and, consequently, its exaction of an ever-increasing reinvestment: there is no genuinely lost object to be retrieved. There is merely an 'effect of loss', a simple retroactive consequence of the symbolising process effected by linguistic signification: vocal materiality is never actually lost since speech is formed from this material; it is only seen as lost once the subject has unconsciously made it the representation of a totally purified, trans-verbal state, experienced in the course of what must be presupposed as the primitive encounter with jouissance.

But if this quest is futile, if it is impossible, then the individual must be prevented from devoting himself to it, from losing himself in it body and soul. It is here that the prohibition intervenes, the regulation whose insistent presence has been noted throughout this trajectory from speech to the cry. The prohibition is there to hide the impossible: to limit the damage arising from the subject's commitment to this quest, damage which is not always avoidable, given that sometimes the subject may have no way of pursuing a mythical lost object other than by identifying with it. The best way not to lose an object is to identify with it, to make oneself that object. To identify with the lost vocal object is to become lost oneself, to become supreme purification, to *be* silence; in other words, to die. Death becomes the only possible locus of return to that initial real that has not yet been elaborated by the symbolic. This is the tragic fate of the melancholic as Robert Schumann, like many other composers, discovered.

Pathology thus reveals the extremes to which this search may lead; it points to the ineluctable fate of a desperate attempt to retrieve the impossible. But while the prohibition in effect signals the impossible, it has the further, secondary effect of revealing the jouissance that may be hoped for in it, a jouissance we

must understand – as should now be clear – in terms of an approximation of, an approach to a necessarily elusive object:[27] one never has jouissance of the object in the sense of 'possessing' it, except in the embrace of death (whence, moreover, the constantly noted relationship between jouissance and death). The prohibition thus in a certain fashion 'drives one towards jouissance', in this way both fuelling the wandering of the subject who is 'hooked on' the fantasy of quest and marking out the path he must follow.

The eroticism of the voice

With Lacan the voice takes its place alongside other objects of the drives identified by Freud: oral object (the breast), anal object (faeces), genital object (the penis). This might help explain the frequent association of the vocal with the sexual – without reducing the former to the latter – and clarify a question usually addressed only with confusion: 'The strange power of singing resides essentially in the emotion that it sets off. And if we look more closely, we will see that this emotion itself has its origin in the "strongest of feelings", in those of sexual arousal.'[28]

According to Lacanian analysis, it is as the object of a drive (the 'invocatory' drive) that the voice finds itself inserted into an eroticising system which, like all systems built around the drives, comprises the following: the object's source (structured as an orifice, as a rim: in this case, the ear); its goal – a satisfaction; its 'impetus' – the tension it engenders by being sought, its characteristic circular trajectory ('to make itself heard'). The eroticisation of the voice follows from its elevation to object status according to the modalities that I have attempted to describe; it has little to do with the voice's role as a mark of sexual difference, the feminine voice signalling the female sex, the masculine voice the male sex. In fact, voices considered most 'erotic', those that hold the greatest fascination for the listener, whether male or female, are voices that may be called 'trans-sexual': the deep voice in a woman (think of Kathleen Ferrier, or of Marlene Dietrich, 'The Blue Angel'), the high voice in a man (the castrato, the tenor). The apparent relationships between eroticism and voice originate simply from the participation of the voice as such in a network of drives. There is no need to establish a 'direct link between the voice and the genetic instinct',[29] or to hear it as 'an echo of the ancestral love-cry'[30] to account for this association.

Strangely enough, Heinrich Schütz's fourth 'Kleines geistliches Konzert' has, in spite of its religious subject, something to say about understanding the eroticisation of the voice. In a rather unexpected way, the play on words in the Latin (*in ore*, in the mouth; *in aure*, in the ear) joins oral pleasure to aural pleasure, indicating further that even beyond the voice of the Diva, the supreme vocal

[27] When we speak of the 'lack' of an object, it is a question less of its absence than of its being 'bungled'.
[28] Victor Andréossy, *L'esprit du chant* (1949; rpt. Plan de la Tour, 1979), 122.
[29] Andréossy, 122.
[30] Andréossy, 125.

object is the very Name of God or, in this case, the Name of Jesus, son of God, he who, as he died upon the cross, uttered a *loud cry*:

> O nomen Jesu, verus animae cibus,
> in ore mel, in aure melos,
> in corde laetitia mea.
> Tuum itaque nomen, dulcissime Jesu,
> in aertenum in ore meo portabo.
>
> O name of Jesus, true nourishment of the soul,
> honey in the mouth, melody in the ear,
> joy in my heart.
> That is why, sweetest Jesus,
> I shall forever carry your name in my mouth.