



Review of *Embodied Voices: Representing female vocality in western culture* edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Series: New perspectives in music history and criticism, General Editors: Jeffrey Kallberg and Anthony Newcomb.

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ABSTRACT: Review of *Embodied Voices: Representing female vocality in western culture* edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones. The review discusses the concept of embodiment that underlies the fourteen essays by various authors in this collection and briefly summarizes two of the essays to show how the concept is variously manifested. The review concludes by suggesting why the concept of embodiment is useful to scholars of music.

[1] *Embodied Voices: Representing female vocality in western culture* is a collection of fourteen essays by authors from various humanistic disciplines. Of the fourteen, two are by authors listed as teaching in music departments; the remaining authors are professionally engaged as scholars of English and French literature, comparative studies, and cinema. The essays address 1) vocal music—especially music sung by women—as it is depicted in literature and film, 2) the representation of female voice in filmic conventions, 3) the role of women as singers in various musical traditions, and 4) attitudes toward the female voice revealed by electronic reproduction. The conceptual category underlying the essays is “embodiment.”

[2] In their introduction, the two editors, Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, define the philosophical context in which the concept of embodiment comes into play. They invoke the theories of French poststructuralists such as Julia Kristeva, Michel Poizat, and Roland Barthes⁽¹⁾ which maintain that the meaning of a vocal utterance—spoken or sung—is constituted not simply by its semantic content but also by its sonorous content. Drawing on Barthes’s notion of “the grain of the voice” in particular, Dunn and Jones focus attention on the essential role played by the “purely sonorous” features of the “audible female voice” in “the construction of its non-verbal meanings” (p. 2). We may note here that these purely sonorous features are those often identified as “musical”—register, sound quality, dynamics, accent, rhythm, and tempo.

[3] The concept of “embodiment” comes into play through the editors’ explicit acknowledgement that sonorous features

must be conceptually linked to the production of vocal sound through a person's body. The collection focuses specifically on the production of sound by female bodies or by a male body meant to project in some sense a female voice. Their insistence on the linking of vocal sound to its human producer draws attention to the idea of sound as "performed." But the concept of embodiment goes beyond a simple notion of performance as a "putting out" of sound. It recognizes not only the source of vocal production but also the various factors of acculturation that affect the reception of vocal sound—of "feminine" vocal production in this instance. The editors assert that vocal meaning—be it musical or spoken—derives from "an intersubjective acoustic space" and that any attempt to articulate that meaning must necessarily "reconstruct . . . the contexts of . . . hearing" (p. 2).

[4] In asserting that performative aspects of sound contribute to vocal meaning, Dunn and Jones recognize the roles played by 1) the person or people producing the sound, 2) the person or people hearing the produced sound and 3) the acoustical and social contexts in which production and hearing occur. The "meaning" of any vocal sound, then, must be understood as co-constituted by performative as well as semantic/structural features. This is the underlying concept that makes the collection of importance to scholars of music. I'll return to this point shortly.

[5] The interest in embodied knowledge has been reflected in a wide variety of humanistic and scientific fields in the last twenty years. Studies focusing on how the human body figures in the ways we know our world range across several disciplines: *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch; *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, by Young; *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, edited by Jacobus, Fox Keller, and Shuttleworth; and *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, by Sobchack.⁽²⁾ These texts are indebted implicitly or explicitly to the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose various writings articulate a theory of cognition which recognizes the intersubjective and bodily basis of all human knowledge.⁽³⁾

[6] The various authors of *Embodied Voices* tap into the philosophical tradition of embodiment by showing how the culturally gendered bodies both of vocal performers and of hearers are reflected in the meanings of those vocal sounds. Some examples should help to clarify these issues.

[7] Two essays demonstrate some aspects of the concept of embodiment in vocal performance: "The voice of lament: female vocality and performative efficacy in the Finnish-Karelian *itkuvirsi*" by Elizabeth Tolbert (pp. 179–196) and "Red hot mamas: Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and the ethnic maternal voice in American popular song" by Peter Antelyes (pp. 212–229). Tolbert demonstrates that women from Karelia (who are refugees living now in Finland) sing laments (*itkuvirsi*) that are characterized as feminine through a variety of "*texted* and *melodic*" figures. These figures constitute "icons of crying" that intersubjectively signal the emotions necessary for the lament. Tolbert writes:

The lamenter projects the experience of grief through her individual voice as a means to orchestrate the collective experience of sorrow. It is the very quality of the female crying voice, a voice that 'cries with words,' that is elaborated in performance to symbolize affect and to set this genre apart from others to accomplish cultural work grounded in the experience of grief (p. 180).

Note how Tolbert links the expressive efficacy of the Karelian lament—its intersubjective meaning—directly to the vocal quality of the female voice. Later she also links the sound of the female voice to the sound of the text and to certain improvised melodic features of the lamenting. Through this linking Tolbert demonstrates that the Karelian lament embodies grief through the sound of the female voice and through its *texted* and *musical* features that act as "icons of crying." In other words, the meaning of the lament can not be conceptually separated from the female body that produces it.

[8] In his essay, Peter Antelyes demonstrates how the "red hot mama" developed as a vocal type through such singers as Bessie Smith and Sophie Tucker and how the musical features of this vocal type are linked to the female body and to the specifically female features epitomized by performers like Smith and Tucker (e.g., the "hour-glass" figure). Antelyes demonstrates how Smith and Tucker were both characterized by the largeness of their physical bodies and of their voices. As Antelyes points out, the bodily presence afforded by both aspects of the red hot mama's size allowed her "to escape reduction to, and containment within, her body" (p. 217). Further, the lyrics of her songs in conjunction with her sizeable vocal presence, allowed the red hot mama to "reclaim . . . the female body from the patriarchal reductionism that objectified

women as bodies alone” (p. 217).⁽⁴⁾ For Antelyes, the meaning of the red hot mamas’s songs derived from her large physical and vocal presence and from the way the lyrics play off of patriarchal expectations of the female body.

[9] While the essays as a group express no single manifestation of the concept of embodiment, each maintains the underlying concern with the performative aspects of sounding meaning. Indeed, the wide variety of approaches to the voice and to vocality allows readers to explore the depth of nuance that the concept of embodiment entails. The editors have organized this wide variety of approaches in two ways. First, there is a mostly chronological ordering of the topics: the first essay addresses the “Gorgon and the nightingale” in Pindar’s Twelfth *Pythian Ode* while the last deals with Madonna’s song “Like a Prayer” and her “Make a Wish” commercial. The second ordering, the one reflected in the book’s larger sections, reflects four large topics: Part I—“myths and fantasies of the female voice” (p. 7); Part II—“listeners’ responses to female vocality” (p. 8); Part III—the “cultural authority and creative force” of “feminine vocality” (p. 10); and Part IV—“the potent dream of maternal presence” through female vocality.

[10] The essays of Part I address female vocality in literature by Pindar, Dante, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. In Part II, they focus on performance traditions in late-sixteenth and early- seventeenth-century English theater; mid-twentieth-century attitudes toward the trained female voice in the American film musical; and perceptual reactions to the disembodiment of the female voice through electronic reproduction. The essays of Part III address George Eliot’s *Armstrong*, which meditates on the authority displayed by the opera diva in her vocal performances; the resituating of a female voice in Louise Colet’s “protofeminist text” *La Servante* (p. 11); the vocal implications of the cinematic technique of direct address in films by Francois Truffaut and Trinh Minh Ha; and the cultural power of the female voice in ritual lament. Finally, the essays of Part IV address the role of mothers’s songs in novels of Toni Morrison; the expressive power of the red hot mamas in the early-twentieth-century blues tradition; and Madonna’s role in the tradition of women’s creativity in the twentieth century.

[11] I conclude by adopting a more evaluative stance toward the collection, returning finally to the concept of performative embodiment which makes these essays significant for music scholars. In their introduction, Dunn and Jones state that “voices inhabit an intersubjective acoustic space” and that to understand the meaning of vocally-produced sound, the “contexts of hearing”—the intersubjective acoustic space—must be recovered. All of the essays succeed in their attempts to recover—or better to dis-cover—the layers of acculturation that play a role in “hearing” but few make any attempt to dis-cover the qualitative features of vocal sound that are performed or received in that context. There is little discussion of vocal or musical sound as such and what does occur is spare and merely suggestive.⁽⁵⁾

[12] In all fairness I should point out that many of the essays are about sounds that have never “actually” occurred, as in the fictional accounts of Sirens and opera divas, but this focus affirms the literary interests of the authors—interests that may not automatically transfer to the interests of musical scholars. One essay, that by Elizabeth Tolbert on Karelian laments, stands apart from the others in its theorizing of the relation between sounding features and meaning in music. Tolbert’s essay alone makes claims about how specific sounds project specific meanings; and while not answering all questions arising from such endeavors, it provides a strong example.

[13] But it is not simply on the basis of Tolbert’s article that I recommend this book for scholars of music. The essays of *Embodied Voices* include little discussion of music as a sounding phenomenon, but they do suggest ways in which we may profitably theorize about musical sound. Dunn and Jones’s insistence on the embodied, on the performative aspects of vocal sound provides a good model for a similar approach to musical sound—an approach that recognizes sound as produced by someone, as heard by someone, and as a product of a social and acoustical context. An approach to musical analysis that takes account of production, reception and context can be figured in diverse ways. We can no longer reject the performative aspects of sound because of their changeability, because of their contingency on time, person, and place. Quite the contrary, it is precisely because of the changeable features of performance that music wields its immense expressive power. The essays of *Embodied Voices* are important because they teach us—*us* as music theorists—about the varieties of performative embodiment that are correlated with music’s expressive powers.

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Footnotes

1. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), pp. 181–83.

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2. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993); Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York: Routledge Chapman and Hall, 1989); Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

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3. See in particular these writings by Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964); and *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

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4. Antelyes provides further nuance to his account of the affective meaning of the red hot mama's songs by demonstrating the oedipal features of sound and lyrics that figure in the songs' performative aspects. In the context of this review I can only refer the reader to this aspect of Antelyes's argument.

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5. The article by Peter Antelyes on "Red hot mamas" was particularly frustrating from a musical point of view since he discusses actual performances of songs without citing their discographic information. At the beginning of the article he thanks David Goldenberg for "supplying him with many currently unavailable Sophie Tucker recordings" (p. 212). While one may admire Antelyes's access to such recordings, their commercial unavailability prevents other critical or analytical accounts of Tucker's vocal performances.

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