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She, the work, said it: undoing vocal exceptionalism by theorizing the relational voice in Kate Soper's *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* from *IPSA DIXIT*

A torrent of sonic, somatic, and semantic hybrids erupt from the first twenty seconds of Kate Soper's *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say*, for soprano and flute. From the moment the duet partners—a flutist muttering *into* and inhaling *through* her instrument and a soprano watching mutely “with a look of consternation”—turn from facing each other to facing the audience, already an “acting out” of the relationality of voice, extended vocal and instrumental techniques alternate in such rapid succession with spoken word and exaggerated displays of *bel canto* vocal technique that, despite Soper's performance note that “there should be an obvious rhetorical/affective distinction between the sections of spoken word (usually calm, matter-of-fact) and those of sung or noisy gestures (demonstrative, melodramatic), even (especially!) when these occur in quick succession,” the total effect of the barrage of ruptures is to hypothesize a thoroughly relational voice-flute, self-other, somatic-semantic hybrid from which these affects issue forth. To be clear, timbral hybridity itself is not a novel development in Euro-American art music. From mid-century modernism (e.g. Ligeti and Xenakis) to the present (e.g. Georg Friedrich Haas and Ashley Fure), the interest in ensuring listeners could individuate so-called “voices” of a musical texture through counterpoint has been gradually superseded by an interest in layering sonorities into a sonic assemblage that moves in unison in the manner of a “super-instrument.” Some particular implementation of timbral hybridity, i.e. some uniquely constituted super-instrument (of which Soper gives us several) would remain novel. But what is more radically novel about Soper's *Only the Words Themselves...*, is its thorough discursivity.

Only the Words Themselves... also exists as the second work of *IPSA DIXIT*, a six-work

evening-length cycle of “chamber music theatre” for soprano, flute, violin, and percussion that was a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in Music. *Ipsa dixit* is Soper’s feminization of the Latin *ipse dixit*: “he, himself, said it,” a term which denotes the fallacy of presumed authority, or expecting one’s own claims to be self-certifying in the ear of the listener. Does Soper’s *IPSA DIXIT* lodge a claim itself? We need only look to the titles of the other component works to heed Alex Ross, who offers, “Call it philosophy-opera.” With titles such as *Poetics*, *Rhetoric*, *The Crito*, *Metaphysics*, and *Cipher*, and texts drawn from Aristotle, Freud, Wittgenstein, Jenny Holzer, Lydia Davis, and others, Soper squares her shoulders to the audience (quite literally, in the press photo), and waits for the listener to pronounce to him- or herself “*ipsa dixit*,” that is, *Soper, herself, said it*. We are sure she says it, but exactly what? And if *ipse dixit* refers to a fallacy, aren’t we to expect that *IPSA DIXIT* self-consciously doubts its own authority? If only the words themselves mean what they say, then, *by God!*—what are we doing sitting through ninety minutes of philosophy-opera? Soper offers self-effacingly that opening the work, as the soprano does, by asking, “What is art?” is “a little grandiose, bordering on pretentious.” Instead, her aim is to “sound the depths of the tangled relationship between art, language, and meaning” and to examine “the treachery of language and the questionable authenticity of musical expression.” But we can place a finer point on this: what follows is not a tangle but rather a closely argued claim about voice, *logos*, identity, and subjecthood—a critique of naturalized voice and of the cryptosubjectivity implied by a supposedly autonomous aesthetic work.¹ In movement VI, Jenny Holzer has the final word in the mouth of Soper’s soprano on the point of using language in a work of art in the first place: it’s so that “people can understand you when you say something.” Soper’s program note calls it “delusional” to trust Holzer’s “enigmatic assertion.” Consider the

¹ Following Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

arc of the argument: *IPSA DIXIT* begins with “What is art?”, continues with the voice-undermining “Only the words themselves mean what they say,” and concludes with the work-undermining refutation of Holzer’s “people can understand you when you say something.” We are dared to *accept* Soper’s say-so but also simultaneously to *doubt* it: ultimately, we are dared to doubt the work’s presence to itself. Except for a speck of spoken word now and again, hardly ever is there a solo. Acoustical mirrors abound, configured anew, timbrally, measure by measure. Every super-instrumental gesture has to be construed by the listener as a composite twosome before it can be parsed as a musical sign that interacts with the semantic content. (Even Holzer’s last word on language is “voiced” by soprano-violin in which the violin appears to “say something” of its own—without the aid of language!—on the soprano’s words “say something” by breaking its line of ethereal harmonics and reverting to open strings.) Soper squares her shoulders to the audience as she presses her vocal-instrumental self-other super-instrumental hybrid into the service of voice theory itself. This is philosophy-opera at its deconstructive limit: we watch as Soper dramatizes and finally shatters the very idea of a work having a cryptosubjectivity, foreclosing any construction of voice as an object, of sound as a naturalized notion, or really any essentialized subject position at all. In what follows, I relate Soper’s treatment of voice to Jelena Novak’s work on postopera, I map relevant terrain from recent theories of voice, I position Soper’s aims among a current of composers working to undo what I call “vocal exceptionalism” that includes Chaya Czernowin, Erin Gee, and Ashley Fure—and throughout I rely on details from *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* to reinforce the notions developed.

Before developing my notion of a shared interest in undoing vocal exceptionalism it would be worth presenting Jelena Novak’s work on postopera, in which she makes the case that

some postmodern, postdramatic operas not only may be illuminated by voice theory, but actually theorize the voice themselves. For Novak, a prototypical postopera, one she calls “representative of what was presented as high-budget–late-capitalist opera spectacles on European and North American operatic stages since the mid–1990s,”² and a “highly discursive” work implying “analysis in which the piece is read and discussed by theory, but at the same time the theory is illuminated by the piece itself”³ would be the 2002 monodrama *One*, performed by Barbara Hannigan and composed by Michel van der Aa. *One* consists of Hannigan’s live performance, a film of Hannigan portraying various alter egos of herself, and fixed media playback incorporating electronic sounds alongside Hannigan’s pre-recorded voice. In *One* Novak hears a “vocal alloy” that upends conventional opera’s careful détente between voice and body, instead inscribing Steven Connor’s concept of the vocalic body:

“Two relations are questioned in *One* simultaneously: between the singing body and its voice, and between the live performer and its projected double. ... The singer’s body produces a voice on stage in *One*, and the singing body is at the same time determined by the voice in a virtuous overlapping of projected and live performed sounds and images. A specific perception of the singing body is provoked, one that Steven Connor designates as the vocalic body, or voice-body: “A surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice.” ... I read *One* as a strong critique of the common relationship between body and voice in conventional opera, where it often appears to be the “blind spot,” or pre-determined convention.”⁴

By a blind spot in conventional opera, Novak refers to the voice-body gap produced by the division of bodies into “real” (singer) and “represented” (character) while their voices coincide in the same body: “The voice comes from the ‘real’ live body, but that live singer, unlike a

² Jelena Novak, *Postopera: reinventing the voice-body* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate: 2015), 150.

³ *Ibid.*, 8n16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

ventriloquist, does not exist in the symbolic order of the spectacle's represented fiction."⁵

(Abbate's notion of operatic "deafness" in which characters in conventional operas are deaf to the singing body on stage is another way of stating this gap.⁶) Novak helpfully summarizes the postoperatic program as one in which "subject, language, identity, and voice come under threat as unique categories, and even the notion of uniqueness is redefined in its multiplicity."⁷

Although on this last point Novak is referring to and calling into doubt Adriana Cavarero's notion of vocal uniqueness,⁸ the postoperatic program shared by van der Aa and Soper is one that reinforces Cavarero's critique of logocentrism in Western thought—especially in Derrida—for its disavowal of the materiality of the voice. The postoperatic program intends to recuperate the voice and the vocalic body without reinscribing self-presence, auto-affective ideas of identity, logocentrism—or, and here is the crux—a phonocentric vocal fetishism. Annette Schlichter diagnoses in Judith Butler's work a similar Derridean penchant for avoiding any sort of vocal fetishism, and she states the problem ably: "Ironically, Butler's Derridean heritage, which cautions her against the risk of phonocentrism and vocal fetishism, might have motivated her to throw out the physical baby with the metaphysical bathwater, thereby binding her to a logocentric tradition that cannot elevate the (sonic) sensible to the level of the intelligible."⁹ This is precisely the problem confronting composers working with voice: how to render sensible the materially affective dimension of the voice (i.e. the Barthesian grain or the dimension that exceeds language) without reinscribing the set of notions involving identity, auto-affective presence, a backdoor logocentrism or dependence of somatic meaning upon semantic meaning,

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 119.

⁷ Novak, 43.

⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*.

⁹ Annette Schlichter, "Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity" in *Body and Society* 17, no. 1 (2011), 43.

or, most simply, vocal fetishism (consider the Metropolitan Opera's motto for 2017–18: The Voice Must Be Heard). This is the project I would like to call undoing vocal exceptionalism.

What distinguishes Soper's means of undoing vocal exceptionalism from van der Aa's is its concern with relationality instead of a mere proliferation of multiples. Recall Novak's formulation of the voice-body gap in conventional opera: *unlike* the ventriloquist, the singing body is denied admission to "the symbolic order of the spectacle's represented fiction." In *Only the Words Themselves...*, however, the ventriloquism *is* the spectacle; the ventriloquizing singing and fluting bodies *are* the represented fiction. In the first movement, "Go Away," the soprano and flute in turn each pronounce and enact the dramatic situation of Lydia Davis's short piece "Go Away," which not coincidentally is written in the second person ("you are hurt by the words"). Which voice is the narrator? Which the spurned lover? Which rehearses the hurtful words of the male partner? They use each other to perform the projection of the first-person history into the register of the second-person and to perform the sonic quotation marks around the words of the partner. The movement concludes with the soprano silently mouthing "the words themselves mean what they say" while the flutist audibly whispers those words into the instrument. In the second movement, "Head, Heart," the super-instrument is produced more straightforwardly rather than via disjunctions: Soper asks the soprano to "match flute timbre as much as possible." To this end, the melodic material consists entirely of overtone arpeggios, and bass flute is used so that the register of the upper partials and the breathy timbre of the instrument itself will have the greatest affinity with the soprano voice. The third movement, "Getting to Know Your Body," concludes following the instruction "Try to keep your eyeballs still" with the hocketing of tone and [ch] sounds between soprano and flute that implausibly re-enter after dramatic pauses ("BOTH PLAYERS FREEZE") with complete precision but without

preparation. (The soprano is asked to “stare straight ahead, *not* at score. There must be *no perceivable coordination* between sop. and picc.: picc. may cue re-entrances with tongue pizz. inaudible to audience.)

The relational voice theorizes itself in *Only the Words Themselves*.... We find in Soper’s duet, following Jean-Luc Nancy, that being is being *with*—not subjecthood: voice paves way for the subject but is not the voice of the subject.¹⁰ The way this is achieved through embodying the voice, through *acting out*, is curiously melodramatic. Peter Brooks notes that the *bodiliness* of melodrama provides a thread of somatic meaning to the operatic tradition, in which we otherwise accept disembodied voices and “a large measure of illusionism,” combining “the height of artifice with the most natural of instruments, the human voice.”¹¹

Soper’s gambit here is to undo vocal exceptionalism and *denaturalize* the human voice through extending its techniques and fashioning timbral hybrids while adopting—perhaps ironically—some of the techniques of melodrama that allowed it to explore the verge of hysteria, such as a thrown ventriloquial voice and the impossibility of neatly cleaving semantic meaning from somatic meaning (on this last point Dolar focuses, too¹²). The play of signs Soper is working with (the guttural gasps and jet whistles indicating hurtness, the various ways the phrase “what the words say” is set, including pale *non vibrato*, vocal sounds colored by flute multiphonics, or inhaled tones in the voice) accomplishes even better than opera what Lawrence Kramer suggests is opera’s opportunity to—*contra* Derrida, who supposes it impossible—display in person (i.e. in anything other than the traces of writing) the dissemination phase of *différance*, or what Derrida

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Vox Clamans in Deserto” in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 45.

¹¹ Peter Brooks, “Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 24.

also describes as the explosion of the semantic horizon: “Opera seems bent on revoking this limitation. Its *différance* appears materially, seductively, in and as the bodily interplay between singing voice, instrumental envelope, and receptive ear.”¹³ Add fluting voice, singing flute, super-instrumental envelope, and the ear of the distributed self, located only through relation, and we have the rhetorical gambit of *Only the Words Themselves*.... It helps that the Lydia Davis source text is about the traces of semantic meaning that dissonate against imputed intentions. The narrator/spurned lover knows that the male partner does not mean what the words say; he only intends the anger behind the words. If he were to say what he meant, i.e. “I’m very angry at you” (which Soper sets in a beautifully distended microtonal arpeggio in unison between “pale/expressionless” voice and flute—which is her extra-textual way of casting it into doubt), he might limply communicate the anger, but what hurts more is his choosing to express anger in words that dissonate against what he really means. But, of course, this dissonance is what he intends.

If Kramer is right, postopera is starting to look more like opera. For Kramer, plain old opera “constitutively undermines its own aesthetic pretensions” and is “always in danger of being exposed as a purveyor of what Freud called the ‘forepleasure’ that screens fantasy; opera as high art continually risks being reduced to an alibi for the practical art of psychosexual equivocation.”¹⁴ Regarding the former, *IPSA DIXIT*, as we have seen, is a project that asks us to dare to trust but also to disbelieve the pronouncements of a work of art that she, itself says. Regarding the latter, the avenue of escape from postopera being reduced to merely a psychosexual funhouse of mirrors is precisely that of undoing vocal exceptionalism. The set of

¹³ Lawrence Kramer, “Opera: Two or Three Things I Know About Her” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 202.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

concerns Nina Sun Eidsheim explores in *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* may provide a guide for measuring the contours of compositional work in undoing vocal exceptionalism. Eidsheim reconfigures the status of voice and the theory of music by insisting on the “thick event” of music heard not through a “figure of sound” that would imply stock, stable referents that are constructed already, but rather with and through an ongoing, relational transfer of energy, never some knowable aesthetic object.¹⁵ There is a perpetual deferral of the final meaning of vibrational practice.¹⁶ Soper’s textures that dwarf and swell the human voice into super-instrumental textures that eschew stock, stable referents and perpetually defer meaning are paradigmatic “thick events” that would allow us to follow Eidsheim in denaturalizing sound, the voice, or subject positions.

Other composers working against vocal exceptionalism share Eidsheim’s concerns but accomplish them by very different means. Erin Gee avoids semantic utterances completely (although sometimes using “remnants or artifacts of phonemes” in non-semantic contexts) in a series of works called *Mouthpieces*. Her notes before the *Mouthpiece* series include the following:

“In the Mouthpieces, the voice is used as an instrument of sound production rather than as a vehicle of identity. Linguistic meaning is not the voice’s goal. ... The Mouthpieces presuppose a state of listening. They engage physiology rather than psychology. ... the articulatory possibilities of the mouth are often mapped onto the instruments, mirroring and expanding the vocal sounds to form a kind of “super-mouth” that can move beyond the physical limitations of a single vocal tract. ... Not pre-meaning, simply never in the direction of meaning.”¹⁷

Not pre-meaning, I take it, disavows the “pre-vocal” as a gloss for “non-semantic” establishing a comically essentialized subject position tinged with the archaic. Semantic vocality is never the

¹⁵ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as a Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ www.erin-gee.com/program-notes

criterion. “Never in the direction of meaning” won’t allow Gee to follow Soper in the explosion of the semantic horizon suggested by Kramer. Although both composers are working to create super-vocal/super-instrumental “thick events” that destabilize subject positions and a naturalized conception of voice, Gee does it by undermining semantics completely, whereas Soper does it by overmining the semantic possibility of voice, finding instead an excess.

Chaya Czernowin organizes her recent approaches to vocal composition by various “nodes of fixation” she wishes to undermine.¹⁸ Like Gee, she treats the voice as a marker of identity that gets in the way of a music that can explore voice more neutrally. Instead she wishes to achieve a “strange and unfamiliar vocal presence.” The two works she cites as manifestations of undermining identity take the following tacks: “the singular is a plurality” and “many separate voices melt into an enlarged singularity.” She summarizes as follows: “If in *Shu Hai Practices Javelin* the singular grain found varying manifestations generating a plurality, in *Pnima* different and variegated strands are combined to create a single meta-grain that reveals its discrete internal processes and behaviors.”¹⁹ These strategies imply the construction of a transpersonal self as Ana María Ochoa Gautier has it in *Aurality*: this type of vocality implies “the relation between a self that is not conceived as an autonomous being but as the locus of a ‘transpersonal self’ and a vocalization that is conceived as a multiplicity rather than embodying a sound that represents an entity.”²⁰

Other composers are *very much* concerned with embodying sounds that represent entities so long as the human voice is effaced. Ashley Fure’s *The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects*

¹⁸ Chaya Czernowin, “The Primal, the Abstracted, and the Foreign: Composing for the Voice” in *Contemporary Music Review* 34, nos. 5–6, 2015: pp. 449–463.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 454.

²⁰ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 64.

takes subwoofers emitting subaudible frequencies (that is, subaudible for humans) and envoices them via vibrating wires and objects throughout and as part of a towering sound sculpture made of partly transparent, quivering cloths around which the audience is enclosed.²¹ As if to drive the message home, soprano voices appear as mute sirens, only rarely voicing sung tones but rather primarily breathing lightly into megaphones, which then issue noisy, denatured amplifications of inhalations and exhalations. The deployment of megaphones around an enclosed, seated, cramped audience serves to interpellate, as if to drive home the message: *objects are here to tell you that all humankind is complicit in fucking up the planet*. The objects have something to say, but apparently they can say this through a human breath that effaces the voice. I am not sure the breath can efface the voice as much as Fure needs it to. Against Eidsheim's admonition to avoid tropes and stable referents, Fure straightforwardly deploys objects that speak and megaphoned sopranos as mute sirens. (For this reason, perhaps, an infamous male critic at Darmstadt fell into the trap of reading into Fure's work the psychosexual tinges Kramer warns of: he was immediately eviscerated for referring to the opera as the scene of "flying vaginas.") Czernowin, for her part, leans *into* psychosexual tinges: instead of letting the hocketing of breath in *Zaïde/Adama* defer its final meanings, as Soper does at the end of "Getting to Know Your Body," she puts an unnecessarily fine point on it and invokes an additional musical trope: "As they hold each other, the quick hocketing of their breathing ... is quite sexually charged. ... Indeed the containment, patterning, and rhythm can call to mind the regular working of an Alberti bass."²²

²¹ The work is site-specific, so this particular configuration is likely most apparent in the performance I saw at Darmstadt in the summer of 2016. The preview performance I saw in early 2016 at Miller Theatre alluded to this engulfing but was hindered by its proscenium-style arrangement. The performance at Montclair State University in November 2017, which I did not see, availed itself of a larger space—I would assume the engulfing would feel very different.

²² Czernowin, 457.

It follows that there are ways to distinguish among composers who aim to undo vocal exceptionalism, even if they attend to related notions of breath and ventriloquism. Fure uses voices and instruments to ventriloquize for objects; Czernowin uses instruments to ventriloquize for voices to create a fluid, kinetic, distributed transpersonal self; Gee uses voices to ventriloquize for instruments (voice as a non-semantic *mouthpiece*); Soper uses envoiced instruments (the flutist muttering through her instrument, the fluting voice singing overtone arpeggios) to perform the relational self by ventriloquizing for each other. It is finally Soper's use of the voice and breath that most discursively theorizes the relational voice and thus undoes vocal exceptionalism in the manner most closely aligned with Eidsheim's vibrational practice.

This is no easy feat. Veit Erlmann observes that musicology is increasingly “turning away from acts of inscription” (musical works, especially) and focusing instead on “the materiality of musical communication, issues of sensuality, and the like.”²³ What is a composer to do if she is interested in these notions, but also caught up in an economic paradigm in which inscriptions are still reified and exchanged? Following Michael Eng, who diagnoses in the materialist desire for sound just more desire for immaterial theory (i.e. the Real),²⁴ if escaping the regime of representation through theory is treacherous for the reason that “any successful theory is at the same time a theoretical failure,” then perhaps it is the materiality of sound that can do the theorizing. Soper's *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* from *IPSA DIXIT* accomplishes the difficult task of presenting an act of inscription—one that sets a dramatic text, no less!—while simultaneously critiquing essentialized (crypto-)subjectivities. This she does by theorizing the relational voice and foreclosing the possibility of any naturalized voice or sound.

²³ Veit Erlmann, “But what of the ethnographic ear? anthropology, sound, and the senses” in *Hearing cultures: essays on sound, listening, and modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

²⁴ Michael Eng, “The Sonic Turn and Theory's Affective Call” in *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (2017): 316–329.