The Word:
Voice, Language and Technology

In the beginning of music there was the Word—whether "hush" (little baby) or "hosanna"—but from the knife that kept the great castrato Farinelli forever boyish to the harmonizer that made Laurie Anderson temporarily mannish, technology has been used to tweak the human voice and to color the stories it tells. The advent of electronic amplification, radio and recording allowed a single microphone to convey the lip-brushing intimacy of the whisper and croon far beyond the first row of the concert hall. The evolution of pop vocal styles from the 1950s onward cannot be separated from such innovations in recording technology as tape echo, double tracking, electronic reverberation and, most recently, the ever-expanding palette of digital effects. Vocal cut-ups and processing have been essential tools of the avant-garde, from Walter Ruttman's film soundtrack experiments in the 1930s through Cage and Reich to Ashley and Sonami, while artists from Kurt Schwitters to Jaap Blonk have created purely acoustic vocal works that mimic the aural artifacts of technology.

The power of the semantic content of a text when combined with the melodic possibilities of the voice have made "song" the world's most common musical form, and technology-driven vocal innovations have often triggered the emergence of new musical genres (rap being the most conspicuous example). Between the much-touted "abstractness" and "universality" of music and the seductive specificity of words there exists a poignant and powerful lacuna. The voice may be our first and most "natural" instrument of art, but art is artificial, and the link between technique and technology is more than a pun.

For the current issue of LMJ, we invited contributions that address the interplay of the voice, words and technology in music. The responses present a dynamic diversity of approaches, from technology-driven texts to text-driven technology. Eduardo Reck Miranda and Timothy Polashek discuss computer programs for generating texts: For his opera *Sacra Conversazione,* Miranda created a sophisticated artificial phonological system that not only creates its text content but synthesizes these new vocal sounds directly from the computer based on "syllabic stress contour analysis," while Polashek's elegant algorithm produces "babble-ish" poetry and text/sound music. Gil Weinberg's *Voice Networks* is a musical installation that allows the general public to engage in ensemble musical performance based on the exchange and transformation of voice "motifs." Robert Gluck's installation *Sounds of a Community,* on the other hand, encourages visitors to explore relationships between traditional cultural identity, religious identity and musical expression through interaction with a series of sound sculptures modeled on traditional Jewish ritual objects.

Observing the hyper-intelligibility of whistled languages such as el Silbo (from the aptly named Canary Islands), which are used for long-distance communication in mountainous areas, Marc Böhlen and J.T. Rinker sidestepped the thorny problems of computer recognition of *spoken* language when they designed their Universal Whistling Machine: Their computer program senses the presence of living creatures (human or animal) in its vicinity, attracts them with a "signature whistle" and incorporates any response into an extended whistled composition. Basile Zimmermann draws another linguistic analogy: He writes about the adaptation of Western music technology in contemporary China, with a focus on the significance of Chinese language in the incorporation of Western software into local musical culture. English composer and critic David Toop examines his own work in relation to "the

hinterland that exists between vocal utterance and music," including discussion of his collaborations with sound poet Bob Cobbing and artist John Latham.

Melody Sumner Carnahan, David Hahn and Ed Osborn each contribute statements on works about the use and abuse of language. Carnahan documents her collaboration with J.A. Dean's "conducted improvisation" ensemble, in which a collection of her stories serves as a source for real-time group composition. Hahn, who worked for a background music company, describes his day-job–driven hybridization of corporate babble and background music into compositions combining meaningful text and extra-verbal utterances. Osborn writes about his repurposing of primitive language-instruction machines for live performance. Dutch music journalist René van Peer interviews Jaap Blonk (the CD curator for this issue) on the incorporation of electronics into his virtuosic vocal performances. New York composer Daniel Goode is represented by the bittersweet libretto from his recent composition *Interpreting*, in the Composer's Notebook section of the journal.

For the CD, Blonk chose quixotic vocal work from a dozen artists—both well established and emerging—hailing from Europe, Japan, and North and South America: Tomomi Adachi, Vincent Barras and Jacques Demierre, Christian Bök, Anne-James Chaton, Ricardo Dal Farra, Kenneth Goldsmith, Daniel Goode, Lasse Marhaug, Jelle Meander, Julien Ottavi, Jörg Piringer, Américo Jorge M. Rodrigues, and Sprechakte X/Treme.

Voltaire once said, "If it's too silly to be said, it can always be sung." It is clear that in the 21st century, as in the 18th, the trappings of music—the deference to melody and rhythm, the reprieve from conversational decorum, the happy, face-saving support of technology (whether harpsichord or karaoke machine)—frees us to say things we cannot in the normal run of life. There are words that need more than Word™.

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