

Afterword:

Song as Subjectivity and Desire

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At least since the early seventeenth century, music has been conceived as a form of address in which one person transmits feelings or states of mind to another. The address may be thought to come from the composer, the performer, or a fictional surrogate; the addressee in each case is the listener, who may also be the performer (and who may also have a fictional surrogate). The music acts as if passing a body of experience, a sense of being a certain way, from one subject to another. This conception is not exclusive, nor is it always explicit, but it is ubiquitous. The recognition of its emergence, rise, and possible fall offers valuable resources for writing the twin histories of subjectivity and of music, and of highlighting the special importance of the latter for the former—an importance still too rarely recognized.

Song plays an especially vital role in this process, particularly as the free-standing solo song, outside of opera and oratorio, establishes itself as an independent genre, first as art song, and shortly afterward as a principal medium of popular entertainment—the two, of course, often mixing. This development has a long and complex history, but its decisive era is the long nineteenth century, in which the rise of song consolidates itself and sets the course of the eras to follow.

Why song? Why song and subjectivity? The six articles in this special issue provoke these questions from six different standpoints that need not, perhaps should not, be synthesized. The rhizomatic character of the writing echoes the rhizomatic character of the genre. But it is still possible to pull a few threads together with the aim of extending the rhizome, and that will be my effort in these concluding observations. In particular, I want to ask what the relationship between song and subjectivity implies about the character of song independent of any specific instance or genre.¹

Song intensifies the conception of music as address by turning from the quasi-metaphorical form of address available to music without voice to the quasi-literal form created by the presence of the singer and the addition of language. As vocalist, the singer makes the primary medium of address in sound into a musical instrument. As one who intones the words of a text, especially those of the preexisting

¹On music as address and the question as of song as such, see, respectively, my “‘Dear Listener’: Music and the Invention of Subjectivity,” in *Thresholds of Listening: Sound, Technics, Space*, ed. Sander van Maas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 30–50, and “Song as Paraphrase,” *New Literary History* 46 (2015): 573–94.

poetic texts basic to the art song as a genre, the singer channels musical expression through language, a medium in which address is not merely always possible but virtually inevitable. These features of singing have shaped the figure of the singer as exceptional interlocutor since ancient times. Examples begin with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; more than a millennium later, when St. Augustine hears a child chanting the phrase "Tolle, lege" (Take up and read), he immediately takes what he hears as addressed to himself. But Homer's bards, like Homer himself, are telling stories, and St. Augustine's mysterious child-singer is not expressing a feeling or state of mind. The modern version of the interlocutor-singer develops alongside the concept of communication, which can be dated to the seventeenth century.² In *A Treatise on Human Understanding* (1689), John Locke reaches a philosophical turning point when he says of words that they are "the Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions, and express to one another those Thoughts and Imaginations, they have within their Breasts."³ Sentiments would follow in short order. Song as address assumes its fully developed form only together with the concept of the transmission of subjective content from one interiority to another.

As song extricates itself more fully from the general matrix of music, its subjective force increases. Song multiplies the capacity of music to draw those who participate in it into exemplary circuits of subjectivity. Those circuits are historically specific, although they

have remarkable carrying power toward both the past and future. (Song might even be said to be one of the principal means by which subjectivity comes to overflow its historical boundaries.) The circuits may sometimes break down, or be interdicted, or give way to denials of subjective agency, but only in response to the default production of subjective energies. Once it becomes possible to think of music as the communication of subjectivity, the possibility becomes permanent. It can be refused but not abolished. Song literally adds its voice to that possibility. The nineteenth century begins by giving the singing voice a self and ends by giving it the phonograph. (Especially in its early years, the phonograph is an artifice of intimacy.) In sum: in one enduring dimension, music models forms of subjectivity, complex dispositions akin to what Wittgenstein called forms of life. Song articulates and interprets the forms of subjectivity that music models.

What happens to this relationship across the nineteenth century? Let me sketch just two trends. First, there is a growing emphasis on the idiosyncrasy rather than the universality of the feelings expressed in song. The increasing importance of landscape, as in the Rimsky-Korsakov songs discussed by Philip Ross Bullock, advances this emphasis by localizing the subject who views the landscape in a particular time and space, thus suggesting a state of being that, unlike the song, is unrepeatable. Song in this dispensation becomes a means of making communicable what would otherwise remain obscure, even to the subject who experiences it. Second, song, especially the love song, fosters an embrace of the damaged subject as the exemplary subject. As Shelley put it, speaking of poetry, "most wretched men / Are cradled into poetry by wrong; / They learn in suffering what they teach in song."⁴ Song in this perspective becomes a means of making subjective excess endurable. Both of these trends persist today, the damage across a plethora of genres, the idiosyncrasy primarily in art song

²See John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 321–62.

³Quoted by Guillory, 332. The roots of Locke's formulation go back to Sir Francis Bacon, who examines the means of "expressing or transferring our knowledge to others," with, as Guillory observes, a precedent in St. Augustine (who speaks of transferring thoughts from one mind to another) that no thinker had thus far developed. It is worth noting in passing, though the point obviously needs refinement and cannot be developed here, that the seventeenth-century incubation of the concept of communication overlaps with the flourishing of Italian monody and Monteverdi's defense of the modern "second practice" of song composition. On subjectivity in the song repertoire of this period, see Susan McClary, *Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashioning in the Italian Madrigal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴Percy Bysshe Shelley, from "Julian and Maddalo," ll. 543–46, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 125.

with its mandate to respond, whatever “response” may be taken to mean, to preexisting poetic texts with identities of their own. What are the wider cultural concomitants to these trends?

One, at least, or more exactly a symptom of one, comes from a perhaps unexpected quarter, suggested by Ceri Owen’s use of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a template for tracing “the Victorian split between public and private” in Vaughan Williams’s settings of poems by Stevenson in *Songs of Travel*. The rise of independent song occurs along roughly the same historical trajectory as the rise of the image of the Doppelgänger. Doubles were pervasive throughout the era across the boundaries of language and culture, from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Doubles” to Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*, from such songs by Schubert as “Der Doppelgänger” and “Der Leiermann” (plus the associated poems by Heine and Müller) through Edgar Allen Poe’s “William Wilson” to Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner”—even traveling by way of *Parsifal*, which pivots on the kiss through which Parsifal discovers that he and Amfortas are alter egos. This proliferation of doubles is both a way of registering the familiar disruptions of modernity and a way of defending against them. The subject has no stable place in a world riven by accelerating social, political, intellectual, and technological upheavals, but its discomfiture has its own form of stability. Better a coherent division than the dissolution famously evoked by Marx and Engels to describe the world under capitalism: “All that is solid melts into air.”⁵

Doubling, however, is not only topical. In the default form of the independent art song, the voice and the piano constitute each other’s doubles. Each is part of the “same” subjective condition, the one imagined by the song as a whole, yet each is also a distinct, perhaps antagonistic embodiment of the same. In this sense the subject of song is always split. The strength and perceptibility of the split vary

widely, but only in the rarest of cases (I actually cannot think of one) is the split not there. Carry this condition over into the defining relationship between music and words, especially music and poetry, and the doubling redoubles. Song is the genre that makes music out of division.

The doubling between voice and piano and what Julian Johnson describes as the “economy of desire” in the piano song (the voice seeking harmony, the piano utterance) are closely analogous. Neither can be assigned priority over the other. They are perhaps best regarded as realizations of a still more primary condition, namely sharing, which forms social and other connections by dividing something between subjects. Jean-Luc Nancy has theorized sharing as the necessary condition of community and even of sense—even, indeed, of being. “Being,” he writes, “is given to us as meaning” and, a few lines later, “Meaning is itself the sharing of being.”⁶ (Nancy’s rejection of any division between meaning and being is uncompromising.) This meaning/sharing/being “begins . . . where presence comes apart (*se disjoint*) to be itself *as* such. This ‘as’ presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence.”⁷ The internal division of song echoes, perhaps literally, the division of presence embedded the surprising power of the *as*. Song makes audible the ontology of sharing.

Or is that claiming just too much, overthinking the topic and raising a small aesthetic form to an impossibly elevated position? At the level of particular songs and genres of song, the answer might well be yes. Breakthrough occasions in both conception and performance would have to be exceptional. But in relation to the phenomenon of song, song in general, song as such, the answer is surely no. The issue at this level is not *what* we sing but *that* we sing, and we sing almost as universally as we speak. Besides, even at the more particular levels, songs and song genres address as well as embody the issues of division, splitting, shar-

⁵Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#025>. The famous phrase was devised by Engels with Samuel Moore when making a translation in 1888.

⁶Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2; both statements are italicized in the original.

⁷*Ibid.*

ing. They dwell on them and in them, as the articles in this issue amply demonstrate.

Exactly what splits the subject of song varies from case to case, but what matters in the general phenomenon is the bare fact of splitting, which never varies. The split shows that the ego is divisible, infinitely mobile and alienable, and it projects this divisibility into social space. The divisibility is not accidental but essential. As one of the title characters in Hoffmann's "The Doubles" exclaims after being addressed as his alter ego, "Why shouldn't I seem muddled, since I and my ego have just put on another person as if he were another overcoat, one which is too tight here and too wide there, and which still squeezes me?"⁸ The statement is angry, driven by resistance to "an unknown, remote, arbitrary control under which one must strive to maintain one's own ego." But however uncomfortable the exchange is, it is still as easy as a change of coats. And for a moment, the person addressed simply does not know who he is.

Doubling makes the subject other to itself and in so doing shows that the subject is always, essentially, other to itself. It could not be doubled otherwise. This outcome is hardly surprising here in the early twenty-first century; it is even a bit of a cliché. But it was surprising enough in its day, when it came not only as a psychological revelation but also as a symptom of an essential social disharmony not reducible to the disruptive forces of modern life. Splitting frames the subject as always outside any norm that might be expected to govern it, including those norms it takes as its own. That position is the source of its essential idiosyncrasy. The subject is always outside its own house, walking apart in the night-wandering realm of unofficial life, even when it is doing nothing. The inside of the house is always the outside of the subject. The four settings of Goethe's "Wanderers Nachtlied" discussed by Scott Burnham speak directly to this point. In each, as already in the poem, the place of promised rest is sure—but somewhere else, and in each a different somewhere.

⁸*Tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, ed. Leonard J. Kent and Elizabeth C. Knight (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 237.

(It may be worth mentioning in passing that when Charles Ives set the poem in 1901 or 1902—just to add an American voice to the national mix of composers in this issue—he provided the exception that proves the rule. His setting, very limpid and simple, ends with multiple repetitions of "du auch" [you, too] or, in his wife's translation, "will rest" over tonic E-major harmony. Ives tries to make elsewhere *here*, but the repetitions themselves displace what they seek to secure. In addition, the dual-language alternative is revealing because, although the notes are the same, Ives's word-setting produces markedly different emphases when the song is sung in German and in English. The non-priority of one version over another that Laura Tunbridge finds in a setting of a Heine poem by Richard Strauss here becomes an internal "versioning," as she calls it. This song is its own double.)

At the same time, doubling shows the subject the inevitability of the damage to which it must hold fast. Doubles tend to come bearing wounds, like Amfortas: Schubert and Heine's Doppelgänger is corpse-like, a "pale companion" (*bleiche Geselle*), the double in Poe's "William Wilson" cannot speak above a whisper, and his counterpart in James's "The Jolly Corner" is missing two fingers from his right hand—an especially telling detail because James at the time of writing had long suffered from an injury that disabled the same, his writing, hand.

The peculiar power of song within this historical frame is to give the divisibility of the subject an affirmative form and so to make it livable, even a source of pleasure, without turning a deaf ear to its difficulties. Division lived may be burdensome; division sung is elevating. The affirmative force of song may even continue when division breaks the bounds of doubling and threatens to abrogate the sense of self, as in the Schumann Eichendorff songs discussed by Benedict Taylor. The subject who sings can embrace the wounds that define it.

This principle is formal, not topical; it belongs to song, not to what particular songs are about. Nonetheless, its exemplary proving ground is the love song, which more often than not is an expression of desire or loss, not of fulfillment. To Julian Johnson's observation that the essential element in love song is the wish

that the beloved appear, we should add that the beloved, alas, almost never does appear. The beloved in song is above all an imperative of absence.⁹ The absence seems almost necessary so that the song can be present. The result is a history of missed encounters compressed into a single occasion. Rilke's poem "You Who Never Arrived" (1913–14) captures the form of life thus evoked:

An open window
in a country house—, and you almost
stepped out, pensive, to meet me.
Streets that I chanced upon,—
you had just walked down them and vanished.
And sometimes, in a shop, the mirrors
were still dizzy with your presence and,
startled, gave back my too-sudden image.¹⁰

The beloved is not merely absent, but absence personified. Yet the absence spurs a flight of imagination that continues, still sounding, beyond the poem's end:

Who knows if
the same bird did not echo through us
yesterday, apart, in the evening . . . ¹¹ (ellipsis in original)

This disposition is more than just an extension of the condition of the solo singer, although it is that, too. It derives from the nineteenth-century tendency to treat Romantic love as more a metaphysical than a social phenomenon. In general, this metaphysical eroticism could be celebrated only on condition of its ultimate failure. The genre of song reserved for the celebration, the operatic love duet, rarely escapes this condition, and rarely tries to. Irony in comic opera, and death in grand opera, shadows the enchanted moment of deferral. The darker the shadow, the more moving and popu-

lar the moment, as for Aida and Radamès, Tristan and Isolde, Rodolfo and Mimì, and the list goes on, right down to the Rudel and Clémence of Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin*.

Solo song sometimes seeks that enchantment and sometimes mourns it. Either way, song shares with the love duet an affirmative model of subjectivity that holds fast to a fantasy despite at least a tacit understanding that reality will prevail, or already has. The subject sustains itself on this divided attitude, still in halves and yet wholehearted. This disposition—and the point bears reemphasizing—also belongs to song on other topics, be it landscape or memory or mortality or, really, anything at all. The field of action is song in general, song as such. Song gives Lacan's famous ethical injunction, "Do not give way on your desire," its aesthetic form. Lacan's formulation ("Ne pas céder sur son désir" in the original) is especially apt because it, too, is essentially general.¹² Modeled on the categorical imperative of Kant, it concerns not desire for this or that, but desire as such, which for Lacan is inherently unfulfillable.

Popular song tends to diminish the expressive difference between voice and accompaniment in favor of the voice. To the extent that it does so, it goes even further than the art song and makes division sung division healed. In many cases the singer, especially the pop idol, becomes an icon of the intact self that the listener can obtain only in the fantasy framed by the song, or, more exactly, the fantasy of subjectivity that is the song. That may be one reason why popular song became the exemplary form of popular entertainment during the twentieth century. No matter the genre, though, song nurtures subjectivity at subjectivity's weakest points, which is why we just can't help but go on singing. 

⁹For further discussion, see "But Not for Me: Love Song and the Heartache of Modern Life," chapter 4 of my *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 110–33.

¹⁰"You Who Never Arrived" (Du im Voraus / vorlorne Geliebte), in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1984), 131.

¹¹Translation modified to capture the negative phrasing: Wer weiß, ob derselbe / Vogel nicht hinklang durch uns / gestern, einzeln, im Abend?

¹²See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 315–24. The phrases quoted here have achieved something like proverbial status, but they are actually widely circulated paraphrases rather than quotations; Lacan implies the imperative rather than stating it. It is tempting to speculate that song, which is, again, to say song as such, shares in (and shares out) the same impulse that makes this particular maxim into an imperative.