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Contemporary Music Review Special Issue

Musik und Sprache: Music/Language/Speech

Editor: Lauren Redhead

Introduction: **Musik und Sprache: Music/Language/Speech**

Lauren Redhead

The German phrase ‘Musik und Sprache’ has a dual meaning: both ‘music and speech’ and ‘music and language’. This is a commonly used phrase within the German speaking New Music community to refer to the field of music *with* spoken language, music *that is derived from* language and/or spoken utterances that *are themselves* music. This German phrase, in its potential to refer to any or all of these types of music, captures the ideas that are explored in this issue in relation to contemporary music practice, and its intersection with spoken performance, sound poetry, creative practices that involve music and text, and the consideration of the voice and its musical role. In English, the phrase ‘music and language’ might broadly refer to disciplinary positions across creative musical practice, music psychology, music aesthetics, music and literary criticism, and many more: taken together these disciplines offer a number of wide-ranging approaches to speech, language and the voice. While here, perspectives from some of these disciplines—in particular the philosophy of music and language (*Sprachphilosophie*), literary criticism, linguistics and the philosophy of the voice—inform the perspectives of a number of articles, the contemporary creative practice of music and language is the focus. Taken together, these articles explore this aspect of musical practice in specific examples of European, American and Australian art of the 20th and 21st centuries. In their variety, they broaden the available musicological discussion of examples of work situated between music, text, speech and language, with a focus on a wide variety of artists who do not yet frequently appear in such literature. They create a picture of an international and interdisciplinary body of work and its themes, interstices, and implications. As such, it is hoped that this issue will be of interest to those researching the individual composers whose work is explored, and to those with interests in sound poetry, *Sprachmusik*, and voice, speech and text within contemporary music more generally.

The phrase ‘Musik und Sprache’ captures the multiplicity and plurivocality inherent within many of the uses of text, speech and language *in* and *as* music that this collection of articles focuses on. In this respect, Karl Bühler’s (2011 [1934]) conception of the ‘symbolic field’ in connection with language is of relevance to the way that many of the authors frame their considerations and analyses. Bühler writes that

... the raw succession in the sound stream of human speech is not yet a field; rather something additional is needed in the succession of sounds, something that corresponds to the net of geographical co-ordination lines or the stave of five parallel lines on music-paper, in order to gain a field or fields from the temporal order. (205)

First, the 'succession in the sound stream of human speech' is taken up by many of the authors when they address aspects of language that are spoken in musical performance but have nevertheless become unintelligible by their presentation. These aspects include examples of layering, fragmenting, re-ordering, or otherwise composing and performing with the spoken performance of texts beyond their semantic understanding.

Second, in the same passage, Bühler goes on to suggest that the 'symbolic field' of language may be something akin to the 'pictorial field' in painting or the 'representational field' in acting; (ibid., 205-7) that is, the context in which these activities are both situated and interpreted. In Bühler's description, these symbolic fields are both cultural and semantic, drawing on symbols and representations that originate from within themselves and from outside.¹ It is his intention to show that the interpretative operation in the case of painting, or acting, or stave notation, is separate from that for language when it is employed for communicative purposes and when it is interpreted for its linguistic meaning. However, authors and musicians writing in this issue demonstrate how other 'symbolic fields' might be at work in the interpretation of pieces and practices in the field of music and language: indeed, the 'pictorial field', and a 'sonic field' both frame many of these discussions in terms of the shape of text on the page and the sound spoken language which is preferred over its semantic meaning.

Third, while Bühler's musical metaphor extends to a discussion of how pitch and musical notes are represented by stave notation, he conflates this with the representation of musical meaning. Therefore, when he writes 'language does not paint', (ibid., 215) it is clear how language cannot be considered only within the 'pictorial field' in which painting is traditionally interpreted. Yet it might also be supposed that while language might not itself paint, it might be interpreted within the 'pictorial field' by an interpreter who wishes to do so. All of Bühler's systems of representation contain values that are '*extraneous to the field*' and those that are '*proper to the field*'. (ibid., 207, original emphasis). These extraneous values (shape, sound) are those that invite the reconsideration of language in music: and, rather than linguistic meaning, are those that the authors in this volume often consider. As a result, in providing a framework for the discussion of representation in language, Bühler has also

¹ In this respect, a comparison may be made with Lacan's concept of the 'symbolic order', which considers how aspects of social life such as tradition, behavioural practices, aspects of society and culture, and the institutions that represent them are enmeshed with language and its acquisition. (cf Lacan, 1998)

provided a way in which language's non-representational aspects might also be considered: in the situation of language beyond its usual symbolic field.

This issue itself is framed by two contemporary positions articulated by composers who are active in the German-speaking New Music world. Cornelius Schwehr (*1953) is a German composer of a wide range of works for the concert hall, radio, and film, and is known for his focus on music with text and spoken language. A translation of Cornelius Schwehr's keynote address at the RMA's Music and/as Process Study Group at Edinburgh Napier University from 29 June - 1 July 2018, titled 'Music and Language', is given as the starting point for the discussion. Schwehr's article explores this joint meaning of 'Sprache' in and beyond his series of works titled *Sprachmusik*. Here, he considers text and speech as both meaning and as sound within compositional practice, drawing on their relationships with written practices, with the spoken word and the speaker, and drawing out their relationships with the composer-as-listener. About Schwehr, Carolin Naujocks has stated that,

[his] musical language is characterised by a subtle constructivism. Everything superficial and one-dimensional is alien to him. Therefore, the listeners' attention is directed to the musical detail and effects of multilayered compositional processes that are often integrated into different contexts at the same time. (2004)

These aspects of constructivism and layering are precisely those highlighted by Schwehr in his text: this article represents the first substantial exploration of Schwehr's work in English, and emphasises the specific importance of the German language to understanding his practice, which perhaps may account for the more limited reception of this music in English-speaking countries than it could be thought to deserve.

Closing this issue is an interview with the Swiss composer Annette Schmucki (*1968), whose work embraces similarly diverse contexts to that of Schwehr, including the concert hall, Hörspiel, and improvisation. At one time a student of Schwehr, Schmucki's approach is both in some ways similar to that composers, and in other ways displays the obvious influence of her former teacher. Nevertheless, she also describes the possibility of the re-interpretation of Schwehr's compositional method, concentrating on the material functions of language and the possibilities for compositional process that are offered by it. Schmucki also touches on the representational functions of language and music, describing music as non-representational. In this respect, her position might even be likened to some historical discussions of the aesthetic functions of music and language, such as those discussions of music in relation to language and culture referred to by Andrew Bowie in *Music, Philosophy and Modernity* (2007). Bowie describes how in French Enlightenment theories of music and language (such as can be found in Herder, Rousseau and Condillac), the two are connected so

that music functions, ‘as the bridge between the non-semantic and the semantic, which are seen in terms of the natural and the cultural’. (2007, 56) While an explicit discussion of nature is absent from Schmucki’s position, the ‘bridging’ function of music in recontextualising spoken and textual materials is an important aspect of her description of her work. In considering philosophical engagements that deal with music beyond its link with linguistic meaning, Bowie claims that, ‘non-representational conceptions of language [...] can reveal the interplay between differing symbolic and expressive resources in ways that representational accounts cannot.’ (ibid., 77). Similarly, Schmucki describes how her musical processes recontextualise her spoken language materials, providing a different symbolic frame in which they might be re-interpreted.

Although quite removed from the majority of the present discussions, the historical consideration of the roles of music and language briefly discussed above is an implied background to many of the attempts to present the approaches to text, language and the voice in this issue as aesthetically distinct from positions otherwise found in Western Art Music discourse. For example, Adorno’s interrogation of the relationship between music and language—which is both derived from his readings of Western Art Musics and intended to be applied to them—centres on the ways in which their assumed similarities may mask their important differences. He writes, music and language exist in a state of mutual tension. Music is reducible neither to the mere being-in-itself of its sound, nor to its mere being for the subject. (1993, 405) This argument leads Adorno to consider the linguistic function of music in conjunction with its materiality, something that is worked with and revealed through the compositional processes of New Music. Two options are considered dialectically: that of a ‘form that fits the material’ (ibid., 412) and that of ‘musical-linguistic forms that can be “constructed out”’ (413). The act of composition is where these two approaches meet and merge with each other. Adorno concludes, ‘[o]nly music that has once been language transcends its similarity to language’. (ibid., 411) This dialectical approach could be considered here in relief: rather than informing a concept of representation in music through a material consideration of its similarity to language, here authors argue for the materiality of language itself as an aspect of its musical function. Representation is evoked only in order to move beyond representation in the aesthetic and material consideration of language.

The other positions that are represented in the remaining essays in this issue were also presented as initial versions at the aforementioned conference. Each author extends Schwehr’s initial theme in different ways. They explore multiple aspects of voice, text, speech and language, and their presentation in music, broadly taking in aspects of sound poetry, object voice, music and media, and employing critical approaches derived from semiotics, composition and performance. On the topic of

speech and spoken-word practices in music, Issac Diego García Fernandez presents an historical perspective on another school of practice that is less well known in the English speaking musicological world: that of ‘spoken music’ created in Spain in the 20th century. Richard Glover’s work examines the linguistic components of English-language sound poetry as a way to further investigate processes in music that does and does not employ text to signal them. Both authors consider the linguistic function of texts in this music: García Fernandez as something that is eventually eroded in performance, and Glover as an aspect of sound poetry whose permutation signifies the performative and interpretative layer of work that is otherwise constrained by process.

In another aspect of this theme, the performing voice and its materiality is explored through occasions of voice and vocality in and as music. Jannis van de Sande questions the nature of the voice and its role in signification as it is obscured by noise in music by Peter Ablinger. Conversely, Clare Brady considers the voice as it is performed, sampled and processed in the performance of music by Luciano Berio. Lauren Redhead’s article considers creative textual practices involving writing, speaking and recording text across art forms as a further way of exploring its symbolic and semiotic properties. In these discussions, many of the authors draw on aspects of their own artistic practices as composers or performers to present approaches to text, speech and language that are rooted in current artistic practices and approaches. In their variety, then, these positions introduce a wide range of musics and musical approaches. But their inherent similarity can be found in the way that text, speech and the voice are centred as key aspects of the aesthetic consideration of the question of Musik und Sprache. Rather than a definitive collection of positions on this issue, these are more of a starting point: the beginnings of an expanding field of discussion of contemporary practice in which yet more work will still be done.

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