

Women Singers of the *Via Negativa*: the sirens, witches and bitches of *hell canto*

Forum of discussion : *EXCHANGE 1*

A lecture and concert by **Nick Hobbs** planned for January 28 29, 2005 - as part of Pantheatre's *Annual Professional Workshop "The Voice : Research Techniques"*.

Nick Hobbs presented a lecture with recordings on the singer Captain Beefheart during the 2004 workshop.

These exchanges also should have in mind the ***Myths of the Voice Festival*** which Pantheatre is organizing for July 2 – 17 2005 at Malérargues, the Roy Hart International Centre.

See http://pantheatre.free.fr/pages/myth_voice_gb.htm

1st ECHANGE Nick Hobbs / Enrique Pardo (EP) Sept 20 2004

-----Original Message-----

From: Nick Hobbs [mailto:nick@charmenko.net]

Sent: vendredi 17 septembre 2004 11:00

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Subject: le donne della via negativa

dear enrique,

Pantheatre Paris January conference: "Nick Hobbs..... Avant-garde and marginal contemporary voices. Women's Voices and the *Via Negativa* : "Bel Canto and Hell Canto". Lecture and concert." (or as the Beefheart discussion forum put it "Rock Chicks Worth A Damn")

more qs

i'm amassing a ton of fascinating audio material going from the blues to date, even after i remove the unnecessary overlaps it still will justify quite some time of listening (in theory more than Beefheart inasmuch as my intention is to play one song from each of a number of singers rather than concentrate on 1 particular woman singer - also i don't feel there is 1 singer who is SO extraordinary compared to everyone else that a focus on her would be right - rather it feels like a tradition to which many singers have contributed)

[EP] fine with me. We will extend the listening/conference time. I will come back to you on this, practically.

though if i were to concentrate on 1 singer i think it would be tina turner rather than janis joplin; to my ears joplin is more interesting for what she represents than the quality of her work, whereas tina turner was simply extraordinary - and of course here we enter the matter of race - joplin was a white woman singing like a black woman (in this respect she can be compared to elvis and to beefheart) whereas turner was (perhaps still is) a black woman singing with the entire power of black tradition (this is not yet a position, but a comparison between the two might well form part of the lecture)

[EP] I look forwards to hearing the examples backing this comparison. The idea behind the *Myths of the Voice Festival* wants to probe and follow through precisely this kind of reasoning: the fact that expression (including "voicing") is fashioned by cultural models, and that these models are best "figured out" by myths. The procedures of this "figuring out" (*mytho-logic*) is what art is all about for me - or at least my involvement in "figurative - musical" theatre (i.e. what I call "choreographic theatre.")

A note: it was Samantha Oldani (Italian actress singer who did last year's Paris Professional Workshop) who stirred the Joplin case (and she is not the only woman who takes on the Professional Workshop saying she wants to sing like Janis Joplin...) I brought in the notion of "via negativa" in relation to the Joplin model as an all-consuming passionate form of "voicing" - which ended as we know with her overdose death.

The question is one of "negative" expression, of self-destruction, of burn-out - it is the alchemical Green Lion exploding its guts and burning in its own output - "bleeding the Sun", the very source of energy, in an entropic, sacrificial, often blind and megalomaniacally sincere suicide. Janis Joplin is an extreme case and, because of that, an exemplary one (and fascinating.)

Tina Turner's life-example is almost the opposite, pulling out of the *inferno* of the master-tyrant-husband Ike Turner (or so popular belief has it.) One can see her as an alchemical Red Lion(ness) who has made it through the fire, and roars life into white dead cubs.

Via negativa, more broadly, can apply to women's voices who break, rebel, counter the social expectations of artistic and/or feminine models.

practically it would be nice to either spread the lecture over 2 afternoons or devote a day to it; also we should have a break in the middle anyway and more time for questions/discussion than we had for beefheart; let me know what's possible

[EP] I go for 2 afternoons, and will let you know if bookings allow it.

i'll probably avoid avant-garde voices unless i feel they've influenced the popular tradition (who for example? - not sure) or have come out of it (some of bjork's work for example) or perhaps if they've entered the popular tradition while retaining some of their avant-gardeness (perhaps yoko ono and diamanda galas)

[EP] Your choices.

a similar line of thought (and a growingly contemporary one) is how ethnic voices (which we can define as voices outside the western tradition) have and are influencing the western tradition (there is of course an enormous vice versa but that would be the subject of another lecture - 2006 anyone?) - a great number of african, latin-american and asian voices are all around us now (this is a rich area as the western tradition of popular music owes so much to african music - so how has the more recent exposure to other ethnic traditions (as well as the (re)exposure of the hybrid 20th century western popular tradition to african music) affected western singers?

[EP] This opens a huge "ethic-esthetic" territory. I agree with you that it would lead us too far for the aims of the January/February workshop. It is a great question for the "Myths of the Voice" Festival.

In the 70s, radio France Culture had ethnic singing programmes that everyone recorded - and imitated. This is how most theatre groups first heard Bulgarian singing, Corsican polyphonics, and Mediterranean folk singing. Other models as well, from Korea to Pygmees. Our friend Tran Hai Quai is the tip of the iceberg - or la crème de la crème - especially with his record of "Voices of the World" (not re-published because of authors rights quarrels.)

But THE greatest comment was Passolini's film *Medea*, 1973 I think, which has an amazing soundtrack with everything that was going to obsess the 70s and 80s "third" theatre. I use "Third Theatre" in the sense Eugenio Barba proposed it at the time. And Odin Teatret was (is still) one of the epitomes of this approach. In France there is Théâtre du Lierre. Passolini "did" ("did in?") this new syncretism with his unique mixture of ruthless cynicism, high culture, and désinvolte irony. Maybe we should show that film (once again! Maria Callas in love with a lascivious Caravaggio-like Roman beach bum prostitute, the type that later actually murdered Passolini...)

there is also a parallel discussion to be made about the relationship between classical western and popular musics (partly encapsulated in the opposition between "bel canto" and "hell canto")

[EP] This is more academic territory, and gone over in terms of mythology through the Marsyas/Apollo myth (the musical contest.) I'm always ready to hear an original new re-phrasing (a new re-figuring-out...)

the notion of marginal is pretty questionable - neither joplin nor turner are marginal commercially, though they're marginal in a sense - certainly compared to the sweet vocal paradigms of any number of (good or great in themselves) women singers (carly simon, madonna, diana ross, joni mitchell, debbie harris etc etc etc)

the thesis (theses) are in a very early stage of formation in my head but some lines of thought are:

- the comparison between joplin and turner above - which inevitably has to get into the thorny question of the relationship between black and white voices

[EP] as far as the voice is concerned, very interesting cultural reflection - including my hobby-horse of the return to "soul" as linked with "sex" in soul music or Protestants "spirit" singing.

- how women's voices (within the broad terms of reference of *via negativa*, and limiting my field to the "western" popular music tradition) have developed (not linearly of course) during the era of recorded music (which also should refer to the influence - healthy pollution! - of ethnic and classical and whatever other vocal traditions are around)

- which leads to a potential nicely materialist thesis about how changes in society & technology have affected this vocal tradition - as well of course as the way singers build on, react against and compete with their predecessors and peers

- tricky territory: why focus on women singers? is there anything which is (or just what is) unique to women singers as opposed to men singers? (and vice versa)

[EP] I've just read an interesting article which I send you attached. Martha Nussbaum attacking Judith Butler's feminist positions based on "hopeful irony" performances. I thought of the "via negativa" in relation to this debate: Nussbaum attacks Butler as a cynical quietist. On the other hand the Joplin /Turner model is one of rebellion and explosion (talk of anti-quietism!) - with their own brands of ironies. An interesting ground for a feminist analysis of what we are calling *via negativa*.

- what i/we mean by the *via negativa* - which would overlap with the beefheart talk so i would try to paraphrase and develop what i said before - one line of thought is the way sweet vocal singers (even if the lyrics they're singing can have many shadows) accord with a traditional gender role model (are most of the people who buy madonna records men?); this also strays into a discussion of the country/pop versus blues/rock traditions; and a possibly interesting discussion of how impassioned voices with banal lyrics and music are likely to be ridiculous, while meliferous voices with acerbic lyrics and sophisticated music can be very sharp indeed; in other words we can say there are three (?) lanes of the *via negativa* - that of the vocal style, that of the lyric and that of the musical - and social - context (and of course when all three lanes come together i would hope we hear the most extraordinary results)

[EP] Our concerns gives priority of course to the vocal. But it would be interesting to study how text and ideas follow; and also arrangements.

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