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Correction:

Example 2 has been updated in the online version. In the original image, some notes had dropped out.

Song as Paraphrase

Lawrence Kramer

“**S**ONG” IS AN UMBRELLA TERM COVERING A vast variety of practices, many with little in common, though all (well, most) require an extension of the human voice unto utterance grounded in definite rather than indefinite pitch. Moreover, although not all song involves the singing of words, all song unfolds against the possibility that words may be sung. This possibility is not merely contingent. The existence of song is an affirmation that words as such may be sung, that speech and song entail each other. Accordingly, in most circumstances singing either is or departs from a model of enhanced or transformed speech, or, better, speech drawn by pitched sound beyond the customary borders of articulation. Some such practice is so widespread that song can plausibly be regarded as a semi- or virtual universal, not quite as ubiquitous as speech itself but the next best thing.

Song perhaps best presents itself in these terms when heard at a cultural remove. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss recalls hearing a remarkable occasion of song amid the “last vestiges” of a dying indigenous culture in Brazil:

Chief Taperahi . . . began to sing in a halting, faraway voice, which hardly seemed to belong to him. Immediately two men (Walera and Kamini) came and crouched at his feet, while a thrill of excitement ran through the tiny group. Walera uttered a few calls; the chief’s song became clearer, his voice stronger. And suddenly I realized what it was we were hearing: Taperahi was performing . . . an operetta in which arias alternated with recitative. All by himself, he was impersonating a dozen or so characters, each one distinguished by a special tone of voice—shrill, falsetto, guttural, droning—as well as by a musical theme tantamount to a *leitmotif*. The melodies sounded extraordinarily like a Gregorian chant. The Nambikwara flutes had reminded me of the *Sacré*; I now felt I was listening to an exotic form of *Noces*.¹

Lévi-Strauss invents comparisons to Richard Wagner and Igor Stravinsky, Gregorian chant and number opera, in part to deflate the arrogance of European culture (which he also, of course, repeats). But the more salient feature of his account is its presentation of the chief’s perfor-

mance as a reenactment of the primary relationship between song and speech. At first indefinite, Taperahi's singing is not yet song, but only a promise of song that sends a thrill through the expectant listeners. Song arrives in a sudden spurt of recognition when the singing begins to sound like enhanced speech. The enhancement takes the multiple forms that, to Lévi-Strauss's Western ears, evoke recitative, aria, and chant. The multiplicity of genre matches the multiplicity of intonation that enables the song to "speak" for the characters whose narrative it recounts. No one genre prevails. In this exemplary performance, this exemplary song act, the chief's speaking voice both finds and loses itself. It emerges from its tenuous murmur into something clear and strong, but only in passing. Once made audible, the speaking voice metamorphoses into a singing voice that branches out into many voices, none of which belongs to the singer but all of which belong to his song.

What does it take to theorize song as thus understood rather than to theorize specific genres of song? How can we think about song—if we can—as a relationship of language and music in a purely potential mode, independent of the relationships between words and music typical of those genres? And how can we bring—if we can—such theorizing back to specific genres in a revealing way? What about particular songs?

To answer those questions, it seems necessary to ask at least two more. On the one hand, we have to ask what the possibility of speech consists of. That possibility is not just a blank to be filled in; it has a positive consistency. The possibility of speech is a space we inhabit at every moment, and as all spaces do it has texture and resonance, and as all spaces do it asks us for acts of orientation. This speech-space is not fixed in place but it is neither imaginary nor metaphorical. The first mapping of physical space is done as much by the reach of voice as by the grasp of vision. Song is a second mapping unless it precedes the first. All song is poured into (speech) space.

On the other hand we have to ask on what axis the relationship of actual words and music may vary. No doubt there are many such axes; we need to seek one with a good claim to be considered primary. The answer to the second question should help prepare an answer to the first. The challenge posed by both questions is how to speak effectively about a phenomenon that, in pressing against the limits of speech, also presses against the dimension of historicity that speech always brings with it. How can we theorize song as a semi-universal without losing its historicity and lapsing, in that loss, into refined but recognizable versions of clichés about music as a universal language that transcends mere words?

This is not really a single question, and it certainly has no single answer. The following reflections mean to keep that in mind. They will

try to behave like the voices they reflect on. They will jostle, overlap, and coexist instead of following a strict sequential logic. They will try to knead their topics the way song kneads speech.

Songspeak

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank—the tongue of his foreplane
whistles its wild ascending lisp.

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

In most Western song since the early modern era, and perhaps earlier, the primary question about words and music is how separate they are. In what may roughly, for lack of better terms, be called folk and popular song, words and music are presented as an indivisible unity, even when they have been cobbled together *ex post facto*. The words and music do not represent separate agencies, nor are they kept separate from the agency of the performer; the music is not a commentary or critique or interpretation of the words. Such song is like the expressive inflection of speech writ so large as to become an utterance in its own right. In art song, these relationships are reversed. If there is unity (which is probably more the exception than the rule), that unity is achieved, not assumed. The words and the music emphatically represent separate agencies, and their separation from each other extends to the separation of the performer from both. The custom of providing printed texts at recitals of art songs is indicative: the music of an art song stands apart from the utterance whose voice it becomes. As a condition of genre, the song is “about” the process by which its music reconceives and rearticulates, but never erases, a prior statement in words. The composer’s job is to make that process discernible. The performer’s, especially the singer’s, job is to make it audible. To do that requires a continual negotiation with the demands—sometimes competing, sometimes contradictory, sometimes just different—of textual and musical expression. Song in this vein is not (or not only) inflection; it is counterstatement.

Obviously these polarities are somewhat idealized and open to exceptions and intermixing, and obviously they nonetheless conduce to very different aesthetics of song. But what is at stake here is how they can be theorized together—which, it should be added, is not quite the same thing as asking what they have in common.

If we abstract from these twin aesthetics, what remains? That is: if song is something more and other than an act of performance that animates a transparent meaning (the popular aesthetic), or an act of composi-

tion that expresses a latent meaning and intensifies those meanings already manifest (the traditional Lied aesthetic), or a combination that incorporates, extends, and appropriates a song text, whether with or against the grain or both (the modernized Lied aesthetic), then what is a song, what does it do, and what is its relationship to the potentiality of singing language? What is the relationship between potential song and potential speech?

The answer to that last question may hold the key to the larger one. Any utterance harbors the potential for other utterance, for the simple reason that anything that is said can also be said in other words. Occasions of speech entail the possibility of paraphrase. This relationship is so fundamental that it has escaped adequate notice. It works whether an utterance is predominantly performative or predominantly constative, and it works incessantly. Insofar as paraphrase acts on prior utterances, whether implicit or explicit, it has a claim to be considered the primary speech act. Paraphrase in this sense has nothing to do with the reductive synopsis once famously stigmatized as “the heresy of paraphrase” by Cleanth Brooks and the mid-twentieth century New Critics.² On the contrary: paraphrase is the very life of language. (More on that life later.) And insofar as song is a kind of refigured speech, song too is a form of paraphrase.

What form? A song is the virtual paraphrase of an actual or potential utterance, independent of whether the words involved are treated as sources of enunciation, mimicry, or deformation. The song acts globally first and then, where the text is known or can be surmised, the song acts with a local intelligence. (The duration of that “then” may constantly expand and contract and may change drastically in an instant. It can reverse, too.) But at the same time the independence of the song as paraphrase from textual enunciation opens up dimensions of song that are themselves independent of any act of utterance, though they are not—never not—unrelated to the immanence of utterance, which nothing human can ever escape.

It is important to add in this connection that there is no point in indulging in false paradoxes about verbalizing the nonverbal. The independence of song grants no license for that. We have no way to describe what takes place outside language except through language. That brute fact renders the category “outside language” questionable or at best provisional. Language can be suspended; language can be deferred; but language cannot be abrogated. In other words, and in three: song reshapes language; song lessens and sometimes nullifies the distance between language and the basis of language in sound; song hovers or soars over language and rummages beneath it. But unless one is a bird or a dolphin or a whale, there is no song without the possibility of speech.

(Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would say that there is becoming-animal in song, but I don't think so.³ There may be animal mimicry, but that is something else. Even the forms of babble—syllabification, scating, ohs and ahs and various ululations—to which song often has recourse are ultimately placeholders for speech, the vocal equivalents of the number that makes arithmetic possible: zero. For humans, language will always have intervened already, and its presence, even unspoken, is ineradicable. For reasons that would be digressive to consider here, that fact—it's nothing less—induces a resentment of language in many of us, as if language were somehow standing between us and our real existence. My guess is that if we could really strip ourselves of language the results would be annihilating. With apologies to Gertrude Stein: Beyond words is horrible beyond words is *What happens when you sing it?* horrible beyond words.)

Formative Deformation

Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse!
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce.

—John Milton, "At a Solemn Music"

In most genres of song, the singing voice does what the speaking voice does: it enunciates words. But it also does the opposite. Words melt in the mouth of the singing voice. In singing, speech sounds undergo a creative deformation, what I once described as a topological distortion.⁴ Of the many things that are strange about this phenomenon, perhaps the strangest is that it never seems strange at all. Song becomes naturalized with puzzling ease, not to be explained away by appeals to the maternal voice or the acoustic mirror, which, once they are left behind along with infancy, should register in fugitive traces as more strange, not less.⁵ The question of song's strange lack of strangeness is essentially ontological. What kind of a thing is song? If song is a kind of unspeaking, an undoing of speech, why do we find it so easy to grasp? Why does it seem so familiar, like something uncanny that has been stripped of unease: song should be strange but, happily, it's not? (No, but it can always become strange—again?—particularly when it is disembodied. The siren song restores the strangeness that would have been lost except that it was never found. Is the siren song therefore the truest kind?)⁶

As a preliminary to unfolding these questions (there is little hope of answering them), it is necessary to make a pair of observations that run counter to what seem to be the default assumptions. First, the prin-

ciple that song is a deformation of speech does not imply that speech is the norm of utterance from which song departs. The opposite could equally well be true, and it is also possible that the very idea of a norm of utterance is of little or no use, put into question by the phenomenon of song itself. Second, and similarly, the principle that song is a deformation of speech does not imply that speech is the origin from which song departs. In this case the opposite is more likely to be true, since we vocalize before we learn to speak, and may even have done so as a species, as thinkers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Steven Mithen have suggested.⁷ It is thus just as reasonable to say that speech is a distorted concentration of song as it is to say that song is a distorting expansion of speech. There may be occasions on which we want to say so. But it is even more likely that neither speech nor song acts as the origin of the other, that each carries the potential of human voice (that is, of voice destined to language) along different paths that turn out to overlap, cross, coincide, and diverge. We never experience a world not replete with speech acts and song acts unless it is a world hollowed out by their absence. It follows that the questions to ask about song and speech are best posed not in terms of derivation or development but in terms of purpose, impulse, and desire: what does each of these forms of voice impregnated with language want from the other? More particularly, since song is nearly always felt as speech intensified, we can focus on the narrow question, echoing W. J. T. Mitchell on pictures: what do songs want?⁸

The Body of Song

His very voice, like certain contralto voices in which the middle register has been insufficiently trained, and which, in song, sound rather like an antiphonal duet between a young man and a woman, rose as he expressed these subtle insights to higher notes.

—Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*

Voice is a carrier of intentionality in the phenomenological sense of the word. We customarily hear voice as voice-of, either of an abstraction (the voice of law, the voice of reason) or of a person. This hearing may be figurative or imaginary, but when it is literal, when “real” voice is involved, voice becomes the material trace of a nonmaterial form: the reverberation of an idea, a ripple of self. Voice in its intentional aspect is, as literally as can be, material reference.

But the materiality of voice always has the potential to exceed its referential transparency. Recognizing as much was the point of Roland Barthes’s now almost proverbial but once provocative idea of the grain

of the voice, an idea rooted in an experience of song.⁹ Barthes wanted to reroute the reference of voice from the mind to the body, specifically to the singer's resonating body. He wanted to reorient the pleasure taken in the singing voice from the aesthetic to the erotic, from ear to touch. The key terms here, however, are "reroute" and "reorient." Barthes exposed an often defensive gap in the default habit of listening to song and thus opened up a genuinely new possibility of listening, but he did not cease hearing voice as voice-of. Because of that he foreclosed another possibility, this one grounded in the surprising fragility of the ties connecting voice, body, and intentionality. Song, or some moments of song, brushes those ties away like cobwebs (which stick, yes, but nonetheless collapse).

Voice is *of* the body only insofar as it is *from* the body. Voice appears precisely when it leaves the body and hovers in the air. Voice is emitted. In speech this separation is usually kept within bounds by the intentionality of voice, which, like a cobweb, has a certain flexibility and play to it. But song loosens and at times breaks those connecting strands. The voice in song at times sheds its intentionality, precisely by enhancing its materiality, by embracing and oscillating around a stream of definite pitches, by making the contour of utterance palpable, by raising the stakes of the simple act of taking a breath. Whenever these qualities stand out (and nearly anything can bring them out, although that is no guarantee that something will), voice acts as the potentiality of utterance in material form, prior to any attachment either to persons or ideas. Voice in this aspect sometimes stops enunciating words, music, or both, and sometimes continues, but either way it introduces a sonorous frame that forms the condition of possibility for its enunciation.

Traditional considerations of song focus on the expressive and interpretive relationships between music and verbal enunciation, a focus that remains in place even when the traditional assumptions of unity and congruousness between words and music are dropped, and even when matters traditionally ignored, such as space, body, and performance, are factored in. The focus is not wrong, but it remains incomplete. We need to keep clear of the presupposition of unity and we need to keep those once-slighted factors in mind. But we also have to ask how song projects its own passage from potential to actual utterance, from free-standing to contingent voice.

Semantics and Phonetics

In diese Träume klingt hie und da Josefinens Pfeifen; sie nennt es perlend, wir nennen es stoßend; aber jedenfalls ist es hier an seinem

Platze, wie nirgends sonst, wie Musik kaum jemals den auf sie wartenden Augenblick findet. Etwas von der armen kurzen Kindheit ist darin, etwas von verlorenem, nie wieder aufzufindendem Glück, aber auch etwas vom tätigen heutigen Leben ist darin, von seiner kleinen, unbegreiflichen und dennoch bestehenden und nicht zu ertötenden Munterkeit. Und dies alles ist wahrhaftig nicht mit großen Tönen gesagt, sondern leicht, flüsternd, vertraulich, manchmal ein wenig heiser.

—Franz Kafka, “Josephine the Singer; or, the Mouse People”

(In these dreams Josephine’s piping sounds here and there; she calls it pearling, we call it straining; but regardless it is here in its place as nowhere else, as music hardly ever finds the moment waiting for it. Something of our poor brief childhood is there, something of lost happiness never to be found again, but also something of everyday life is there, of its small, incomprehensible, and nonetheless persistent and unkillable gaiety. And really, all this is said not in weighty tones but in light ones, whispering, intimate, sometimes a little hoarse. [My translation. Josephine among other things is a feminine alter ego for Kafka, as the Josef K. of *The Trial* is a masculine one. Whether Josephine really sings with her “piping” remains moot; Kafka’s written piping does not claim as much for itself. Ironically, though, the sentences quoted here are more musical than the singing they describe. Kafka’s language has to be reproduced as well as translated for the irony to resonate. The resonance is Kafka singing in spite of himself. Song, real or metaphorical, is a half-successful effort to retrieve something, anything, from the elapsing of everything, including that of the song itself.])

In most modern Western iterations, song as paraphrase operates in at least two dimensions, which sometimes coalesce and sometimes diverge. The first is semantic, the second phonetic; in the first the song addresses the text, in the second the song addresses the words.

The effect of the semantic register depends on the degree of power or authority accorded to the text. As noted earlier, art songs, as a condition of their genre, depend on mostly preexisting texts that remain independent of the songs that set them, and that preserve part of their separateness while also yielding to appropriation by the music. Popular genres generally have “lyrics” rather than “texts”; the lyrics have little or no independent value and become, on any occasion, whatever the song, the singer, or the arranger makes them. Song lyrics gain power or authority from the music and the performance; texts set by art songs yield power or authority to the music and the performance that appropriate them.¹⁰

This difference corresponds loosely (and with all sorts of exceptions) to two registers of listening and of pleasure in listening: one that constitutes a form of auditory contemplation in which the listener’s distance

from the song and/or the performance is variable and hermeneutically active, and one a form of auditory participation in which listeners are encouraged to abandon themselves to the song as performed. That these two modes mix and cross in all genres should perhaps go without saying, but it needs to be said, in part to parry the predictable charge that this description privileges the art song (it does that only if you happen to prefer the contemplative mode, which I happen to, which does not matter), and in part because tracking such shifts and transformations is a revealing way of understanding what any particular song in any particular performance may be up to.

These distinctions, it should be added, all assume an aesthetic rather than a pragmatic attitude on the listener's part; that is, this whole conceptual apparatus breaks down when confronted with background music. The latter deserves separate consideration.¹¹ Suffice it to say here, in passing, that placing music in the background generally reduces it to a rigid and simplified "message": cultivation when you hear Vivaldi on hold, exertion when the gym pumps in pop songs with prominent rhythm tracks. The prototype of this situation is perhaps the early movie theater, in which a pianist improvised accompaniments to the action on film, usually on the basis of cue sheets made available for the purpose.¹²

From the perspective of the semantic register, there is no preestablished "text" for a song to set beyond a certain fairly crude level of topicality. The traditional idea that the art song divines the meaning of a text in the latter's innermost secrecy and unfolds that meaning better than the words can, with an understanding that supposedly exceeds that of the text's author, is a fiction that throws a veil of glamour over a process infused with uncontrollable possibilities of rivalry, antagonism, and distortion as well as mutuality and transformation. The song must construct the text before setting it, or rather in the very act of setting it. But the song must also construct the text as semantically incomplete. The setting, by intention or not, must be full of slippage, appropriation, reconfiguring. Popular song is in this sense more candid about the power of song as paraphrase; it makes the words dance to its tune without apology. But no matter the model, song is always on the edge of something.

The phonetic register paraphrases utterance rather than discourse. It mimics, or not, the way spoken words sound; preserves, or not, the sound of speech in song; enunciates, or not, the words of the text or the lyrics in an audibly intelligible way. In virtually all song genres, the "or not" carries the primary aesthetic burden. All song, as I recalled earlier, engages in a "topological" distortion of speech patterns. The question is how *this* song, on this occasion, does so, and why. The range of possibilities here depends in part on the degree to which melismatic

phrasing is admissible in a given song or genre, and similarly on the degree to which false accentuation is permitted or overlooked. From a composer's point of view (or at least from this composer's point of view), these questions are of primary importance because of a simple but demanding principle: if you want to set the text, you have to know how to set the words. Setting the words is the means of setting the text. But of course the text, as one paraphrases or seeks to paraphrase it by one's musical discourse, will also have opinions about how its words should be treated. Composing the song is in this sense a kind of listening. And song, which seems like such a simple and natural thing at heart, quickly reveals itself to be complex and qualified. The immediacy of expression in song is not a work of transmission but a process of distillation.

Recording. Translation

Laughs, talks, sings: Performs orchestral and other music: The genuine Edison Phonograph (\$30 Price \$30) is an inexhaustible amusement. Record your own song – Your friends' voices.

—Advertisement (1901)

We need to ask it again: what is a song?

Words set to music, we might say by default, in whatever more or less refined form the definition might take. But that is no longer true—not quite. For well over a century now, whatever else a song may be, it is something that may be recorded, the kind of thing that can be recorded, perhaps the very model of that kind of thing. The advent of recording technology did not bring about a mere adjunct to speaking or singing voice. On the contrary, it irrevocably changed what speech and song are. Song especially: for speech goes on all the time in everyday life as it always has, but song in the modern world is above all recorded song. Live singing is an exception.

So what is a song? A song is a fragment of the afterlife of the voice that has sung its words. That much is true of any song, in any genre. In this context, the context of trying to theorize the “as such” of song, the difference between art song and popular song is of minor significance. A popular song can hardly be separated from its recorded form and subsequent covers. “The” song is a chain of mostly recorded performances, infinitely replayable, in which acts of voice survive separated from the bodies that emitted them—survive not by miracle but by sheer routine. Art songs may still be granted a certain abstract existence in the form of the composed score, which remains subject to interpretation in both the performative and the hermeneutic sense, but the primary auditory

home of these songs remains the playback channel, which “channels,” in another sense, the voices of singers beyond the vicissitudes of change and death. Song is a lively assemblage of vocal ghosts.

In this aspect, songs resemble what Walter Benjamin thought translations to be: real, not figurative, extensions of the life of utterance. Benjamin regards life as a historical event, not a natural one; life cannot be limited to “organic corporeality” but must instead be recognized as the product of a series of acts that express not the mere existence of life but its character and significance. Accordingly “the life of . . . originals attains in [translations] to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering.”¹³ The ellipsis in the quotation omits the word *the*, because although Benjamin is writing about literary texts, his argument really applies to any and all “originals.” Moreover the translations that endow this life with a “flowering” extension are, despite the metaphor, no more organically corporeal than life itself. The horn of an early Victrola is an acoustic calyx. Translations are like phonographs: voice machines.

What is at stake in the posthumous animation of song by such machines? One answer becomes strikingly evident from the Edison cylinder recordings of the voices of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning.¹⁴ The poets, of course, are speaking, not singing—or are they? Tennyson virtually chants, and Browning all but breaks into song, almost as if voice without some supplement from song were not enough to ensure the promise of living on offered by the recording. Tennyson chooses to recite “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” making the reading into a vocal monument, and in a poem about death, which he thus defies. Browning pretends to forget the lines of his own tragic/heroic poem “How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,” a text remarkably like Tennyson’s, so as to preserve the vivacity of the occasion rather than make a monument of it. He makes his voice melodic to end with a toast, the mark of a present that now extends into the indefinite future.

Historically, in part for technical reasons, sound recording sought out speaking voices before arriving at singing voices, but once the latter were accessible, they took over in the spirit of Browning. The bestselling recordings of opera arias made by Enrico Caruso for the Victrola Company in the first decade of the twentieth century are still legendary.¹⁵ But the recorded voice remains vulnerable to its storage medium, and its vulnerability has at times become the stuff of fictional narrative. The rise of digital media has tended to obscure the fragility of recorded voice because the recording seems to have no material form; there is no record platter, no tape. But the age of mechanical reproducibility was acutely aware of how easily the voice could be broken, and at the same time, of how easily the recording, the record or tape, could become the object of near-fetishistic absorption.

Sacred Vessels

If the vase may be filled, it is because in the first place in its essence it is empty.

—Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*

The narrative of Jean-Jacques Beineix's much-discussed 1981 film *Diva* turns on the vicissitudes of a tiny packet of recorded voice, a tape cassette. Or rather two cassettes: one a bootleg recording of an aria by the operatic soprano Cynthia Hawkins, who notoriously refuses to permit recordings of her voice, and the other an equally unauthorized recording by a murdered prostitute naming her killer. The narrative of the film derives from confusion between the two cassettes, which at a symbolic level raises the question of whether recording is in some sense a prostitution of voice. (The film's conclusion seems to say no; Hawkins, at the end, listens to the tape she has forbidden and expresses pleasure, even wonder, at it: "I have never heard myself sing before." But the context of voyeurism and theft, not to mention murder, leaves behind a considerable residue of irony, like tape hiss. And it is uncertain whether the voice Hawkins hears as her own can really be reappropriated from the desires it has awakened in the young postman—another irony there—who made the recording.) The question of the narrative, meanwhile, is whether to destroy or preserve the cassette one seeks. The more powerful the voice, regardless of whether it intoxicates or incriminates (again with a blurred distinction), the more the fragility of its material storage becomes paramount. Song is, song remains, voice at its most prized, but in the era of sound recording the measure of its value is no longer live experience or memory but the danger of losing its mechanical reproduction.

Diva has a precursor in the classic film noir, *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), in which the breaking of voice goes beyond the matters of life and death typical of the thriller genre to become a portent of apocalypse. The material bearer of voice in this case is an overtly valuable object, a 78 RPM platter of one of those Caruso recordings. The tough-guy private detective Mike Hammer is looking for a valise that holds the key to a series of murders. Unknown to him, the valise—a classic Hitchcock-style MacGuffin—contains a critical mass of fissionable material stolen from Los Alamos. At one point Hammer interrogates a failed opera singer, Trivago, who is introduced in his shabby apartment singing along with an old recording by Caruso of an aria from Friedrich von Flotow's opera *Martha*. Trevigo is a collector, an archiver of voices. To bully him into giving up information, Hammer brandishes a vintage

78 RPM platter of Caruso in *Pagliacci* and breaks it in two. The threat is obvious: he will break more if Trivago doesn't "sing."

The breakage unwittingly anticipates the film's ending, in which the aptly named Hammer, a clown in spite of himself, falls into the position he has forced on Trivago. He fails to keep the film's *femme fatale* from disregarding the voice of her confederate, which she has just silenced with a gun: "You should have been called Pandora. She had a curiosity about a box and opened it and let loose all the evil in the world. . . . The head of the Medusa. That's what's in the box. And whoever looks on her will be changed, not into stone, but into brimstone and ashes." When the new Pandora opens the box anyway, she fulfills the prophecy—the curse—to the letter. As Hammer watches helplessly, she immolates herself and symbolically shatters the world by letting loose a nuclear explosion.

Hammer's destruction of the phonograph record is a destruction of the cultural memory carried by dead voices. The wreckage of one medium stands for the wreckage of all. The phonograph record of Caruso thus finds a counterpart in a written record left by Christina Rossetti, whose sonnet "Remember" becomes a leitmotif in the film. The poem's opening lines, "Remember me when I am gone away, / Gone far away into the silent land," form a coded message to Hammer from the woman (also named Christina) whose murder he is trying to solve. But memory itself falls silent, its vessels broken, when Hammer's actions render the silent land, with its echo of Hamlet's "undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns," not far away but very near. The nuclear blast, which here destroys a house—the last of many refuges in the film to be broken into—portends a fuller and more final obliteration, an echo, famously, of the nuclear fears of the mid-1950s. House and voice become metaphorically one in their joint destruction: voice in its vulnerability is the fragile house of civilization.

Auf dem Wasser zu singen

Gesang ist Dasein.

Can a song say what a song is?

Theorizing song independent of genre or instance would seem to preclude talking about any particular songs, and to some extent it does. Any sampling would be arbitrary. Songs paraphrase; song embodies paraphrase as a means of animation. To say as much might be to say enough, given the task at hand. Yet it should still be possible to find in (a) song a trace of its identity as song, a moment of self-understanding

or self-interrogation that arises from the imperative to be song rather than from any discernible structure, intention, or textual content. At least this should be true of some songs, songs that do not let themselves be deaf to their own singing. What songs would those be?

One possible answer is: songs about singing, songs that invoke a principle of song to which they may or may not wholly conform. This answer is an echo of the one that Derrida gave in *Of Grammatology* when confronting the question of why his reading of Rousseau on the supplement should be granted the status of a model, a best example that is as much a paradigm as it is an instance. His answer is that Rousseau's text exposes itself to the force of its own textuality and in so doing becomes a text in which textuality itself may be read.¹⁶ The relationship involved is not simply one of self-mirroring but one of confronting the medium in which the mirroring occurs. To think about song through (a) song, one could perhaps place vocality in the place of textuality and try to discern its traces in the song we hear.

Since my preferred genre of song is the art song, my example will come from that repertoire: Franz Schubert's "Auf dem Wasser zu singen" (1823), a song about singing par excellence. (The text and a score sample appear below as Figure 1 and Example 1, respectively.) The text, so the title tells us, is a lyric to be sung over the water. The song, accordingly, is a demonstrative work: it shows us how the singing should be done. This is a song that instructs the listener how to sing. The song paraphrases the text precisely by shifting the focus of instruction from content (this is the sort of thing to sing over the water) to performance (and this is what it should sound like when you do it). It is this paraphrase, rather than anything the words or the music expresses, for which in the present context we need to listen.

The text uses water as a mirror of passing time, but the song, being strophic, arrests or reverses that passage in the act of observing it. The wavelike motion that measures transience in the poem becomes, in the song, a medium of permanence. To sing over the water is to let song alter the sense of time by its, the song's, infinite repeatability: not its iterability in Derrida's sense (the intelligible breaking of utterance with any and every context),¹⁷ though this quality is included, but the song's capacity to return as itself, intact, despite changes of voice, time, and circumstance. The power of return is latent in the poem's exclusive use of identical rhymes—*rimes riches*—but the rhyme words change from stanza to stanza, whereas from stanza to stanza the music remains the same. Only the ending of the song, where time necessarily prevails, introduces a note of change. The note is quite literally that, as we will hear.

What returns in this way? The song to be sung over the water is not

Mitten im Schimmer der spiegelnden Wellen
 Gleitet, wie Schwäne, der wankende Kahn :
 Ach, auf der Freude sanftschimmernden Wellen
 Gleitet die Seele dahin wie der Kahn;
 Denn von dem Himmel herab auf die Wellen
 Tanzet das Abendrot rund um den Kahn.

Über den Wipfeln des westlichen Haines
 Winket uns freundlich der rötliche Schein;
 Unter den Zweigen des östlichen Haines
 Säuselt der Kalmus im rötlichen Schein;
 Freude des Himmels und Ruhe des Haines
 Atmet die Seel' im errötenden Schein.

Ach, es entschwindet mit tauigem Flügel
 Mir auf den wiegenden Wellen die Zeit;
 Morgen entschwinde mit schimmerndem Flügel
 Wieder wie gestern und heute die Zeit,
 Bis ich auf höherem strahlendem Flügel
 Selber entschwinde der wechselnden Zeit.

[Amid the shimmer of mirroring waves
 Like a swan glides the wavering skiff:
 Ah, over soft-shimmering waves of joy
 Glides the soul there like the skiff;
 For from heaven on down to the waves
 Dances the evening glow around the skiff.

Over the peak of the western grove
 Greets us kindly the roseate glow.
 Under the boughs of the eastern grove
 Rustle the reeds in the roseate glow;
 Heavenly joy and the peace of the groves
 Breathes the soul in the reddening glow.

Ah, there disappears from me with dewy wings
 Time on the rocking waves;
 Tomorrow will disappear on shimmering wings
 Like yesterday's time and today's,
 Until I on higher, more radiant wings
 Myself disappear from changing time.]

(My translation.)

Fig. 1. Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg-Stolberg, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen." Text and translation.

Auf dem Wasser zu singen.
Lied von Fr. L. Grafen zu Stolberg.

Mässig geschwind

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's song "Auf dem Wasser zu singen." It is in 6/8 time and the key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a treble clef staff that is mostly empty, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) where the right hand plays a wavy, shimmering melody and the left hand plays a steady bass line of chords. The second system continues the piano accompaniment. The third system introduces the vocal melody in the treble clef staff, with the lyrics "Mit - ten im Schim - mer der" written below it. The piano accompaniment continues in the grand staff, with a *pp* dynamic marking.

Example 1. Schubert, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," mm. 1-12.

the composition, with accompaniment, shown in the score, but just the melody. The listener is shown how to sing the melody in the event of being on or near the water. The accompaniment is mimetic, famously so. The piano's continuously wavering melody reproduces the image of shimmering that dominates the text. The effect is tangible as well as audible; as Graham Johnson observes in the notes to his 1991 recording, the pianist's fingers constantly execute a wavelike motion as one finger leaves a note only to have another immediately strike the same note.

The fingers too, one might say, have to shimmer.¹⁸ The melody forms a gentle pulsation that returns upon itself incessantly. It never rests. The movement of the water transposes into the movement of an audible light.

The voice floats on top of this shimmer. It goes over the water, material in itself but, as to the water, a kind of spiritual substance. Such “lyric substance,” as Daniel Tiffany has called it, a half-tangible something intermediate between solid matter and fluid spirit, formed part of the phenomenal reality of Schubert’s era.¹⁹ Voice and song dissolve themselves into each other. One shimmer invokes another.

Invokes and reinvokes, because the shimmering of each strophe extends across the higher-order shimmer formed by the cycle of strophic repetitions. The cycle traces a double wave motion. The vocal line divides into two unequal segments. Half of the measures in the first segment begin with the voice mirroring the rippling melody of the piano. The vocal motion produces tiny two-note melismas on three successive syllables, momentarily liquefying the words, which subsequently recover their enunciation only to be liquefied again. The second segment is strictly syllabic—though one of the syllables, as we will see, harbors its own liquefaction; this segment, too, restores enunciation so that enunciation can waver again. The segment begins by hovering, but it ends with a drawn-out version of the descending contour traced by the rippling melody. The shimmer it becomes is latent in it at every moment.

What makes this particular voicing a possible paradigm of song? It becomes so by fusing two actions: by reflectively singing about singing, and by casting its reflection as a paraphrase of the text’s expressed desire to be sung. Song (this one sings) detaches itself from the referential force of the language it enunciates, not by annulling the reference but by transposing it to a new medium, so that voice stands to the words as the words once stood to the world. Song gives us the world at second remove. The sung words become the auditory form of the shimmer, a legibility partly effaced by its own light. “I am not,” the voice says under its breath, “singing over the water, but if I were, this is what I would sound like, so much so that my merely fictitious act might as well be real—is real, is it not?”

Like the voice’s melismas, these processes are not uniformly or diffusely present throughout the song. Instead they concentrate at certain recurrent moments, the overflow of which sprinkles itself over the whole—two moments here in particular: first, a sustained high E-flat in the voice near the end of each strophe, and, second, a voiceless change in harmony as the strophes reach their end. (Both appear in Example 2.)

The high E-flat is the only note of its kind in the piece. The note is one in which the singing voice sustains itself free of anything else, sustains

tan - zet das A - bend-rot rund um den Kahn, tan - - -
 ah - met die See! im er röt - then den Schein, ah - - -
 sel - ber ent - schwin - de der wech - sel - den Zeit, sel - - -

- - - zet das A - bend-rot rund um den Kahn, - - -
 - - - met die See! im er röt - then den Schein, - - -
 - - - ber ent - schwin - den der wech - sel - den Zeit, - - -

1. 2. 3.

decresc.

Example 2: Schubert, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," mm. 24-34.

itself as though on itself alone, with neither ornament nor melisma. This vocal peak seems full each time it occurs, but its effect (depending on performance) is also cumulative. On its first two occurrences, the E-flat prolongs the long vowel of a symbolically charged verb, first "tanzet" (danced) then "atmet" (breathed). But the final occurrence belabors the short vowel of an auxiliary pronoun, "selber" (itself), which in textual terms makes little sense. This kind of slightly misplaced accent is not uncommon in strophic song, but it counts for something here. Making

little sense may be just the point, as the word involved slyly shows. On the last recurrence of its high note, the fully freed voice refers primarily, perhaps exclusively, to itself.

Another feature of the high E-flat is that it occurs over a change to the major mode from the song's prevailing minor; the reversal of that change at the close of the first two strophic cycles is the second moment of concentration. (The notated key of the song is A-flat major, which results in a score peppered with accidentals marking the C-flats that produce the minor. The notation is both expressive and monitory. It needs something, and needs it from the voice.) The song brightens unobtrusively under the spell of the high E-flat, as if the major mode were an emanation from the freed voice. The major continues in force as the voice concludes each strophe with a long descending phrase. But when the voice is done the music, continuing on the piano, twice darkens to the minor after continuing just long enough to promise that it won't. Only in the last strophe, after the voice has fully realized its own songfulness by turning in on itself—something the singer must find the means to convey—does the change to the major take hold, and with it a sense of serenity unruffled by mortal bounds. Only then can the piano keep the gift of C-natural that the voice has been trying to give it.²⁰

The high E-flat also produces the one moment in the song when the voice consistently has the highest written note. The note mirrors for a moment the spatial and sonorous effect of song wafting over the water by shimmering over the musical texture, though the moment is fleeting, almost illusory, and may go unrealized in some performances. (The effect is literal and material with a soprano, virtual with a tenor singing an octave lower than written.) With this note the song entices the voice, entices voice, with a chance or a promise of symbolic self-enrichment. Song seeks voice as much as voice seeks song; and song, however sure it seems, is always tenuous. Nothing in the realm of voice is more breakable.

Where does such fragility come from? Song is strangely fragile no matter how robust it becomes. Consider, in parting, something seemingly obvious and inconsequential, something that turns out to be neither. Song needs preparation in a way that other forms of music do not. Instrumental preludes help singers sing on pitch. But it is hardly surprising that preludes to singing often go far beyond their pragmatic function. Art songs usually take pains to establish more concrete relations between instrumental openings and vocal elaborations. The verse and chorus form typical of many popular songs repeats the preparation within the voice itself, as does the recitative and aria form of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera, as does the alternation between declamatory and full-voiced singing in later opera. Song demands a

frame. Why should it? Why not go straight to the singing voice, with minimum—what? Anticipation? Deferral? Foreplay? Is there something inherently disturbing, even traumatic, about singing voice that makes this preparation necessary? If so, is it the relationship of singing to language or of singing to the body that weighs more heavily, if either does?

“Auf dem Wasser zu singen” again forms a best example through which to form an answer. The piano prelude is lengthy (eight full measures) and continuous with the accompaniment, but it is not a part of the strophic cycle. The exclusion is customary, but the length of the excluded passage makes it notable, a speaking silence. The force of exclusion reflects on itself in this song, as the piano prelude withdraws itself from the arc of transformation and reconciliation traced by the movement of the voice from the prevailing minor mode to the concluding major. The song proper tries to leave the uneasiness of the prelude behind, to wrap it in forgetting through the power of the singing voice, but the first two strophic cycles end in the failure of the attempt and because of that the success of the third cycle is not secure. The excluded remains unforgotten, even if only, so to speak, at the back of the ear. The voice in this song, the voice in song, becomes exemplary in grasping that its underlying frailty consists in a knowledge that is sensed and embodied even when it remains unspoken. Like the deferred C-naturals in “Auf dem Wasser zu singen,” this knowledge must lift itself above an innate tendency to darken. It is the knowledge that the voice raised in song exists to raise a hope—no matter hope for what—that can never be wholly denied nor ever fully believed.

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NOTES

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin, 1992), 359.

2 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1947), 192–214.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 323–37.

4 In “Song,” a chapter in my *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and London: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 130. This chapter also introduced the notion of song as counterstatement; a revised version will be published in my *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music*, ed. Walter Bernhart (Boston: Brill, 2017).

5 The concepts of maternal voice (or object voice) and the acoustic mirror (the latter two derived from Jacques Lacan) do, nonetheless, have musical import precisely because they do leave strange traces both in song and out. See Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996); David Schwarz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997),

7–22; and Michael L. Klein, *Music and the Crises of the Modern Subject* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2015), 40–66.

6 On this dimension of siren songs, see my “‘Longindyingcall’: Of Music, Modernity, and the Sirens,” in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006), 194–215.

7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages” (1781), trans. John H. Moran, in Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986); Steven J. Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005).

8 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005). Part of Mitchell’s argument is that pictures are not only inescapable but also ontologically foundational: “There is no getting beyond pictures, much less world pictures, to a more authentic relation with Being, with the Real, or with the World” (xiv). Or, to put the point another way (consistent with Walter Benjamin’s parallel argument about translation, cited below), depiction just *is* our authentic relation to Being, and so on. But picturing in this expanded sense is something that music does no less than images do, though it does so in its own way—in song, for example, and not because song is topical but because it frees the voice to affirm continually the force of that “just *is*.”

9 Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 178–89.

10 There are, of course, exceptions; when are there not? The lyrics of Cole Porter and Bob Dylan come quickly to mind. These nominally popular song lyrics have gained the ability to reverse the traditional text-music relationship of art song. The lyric emerges from its fusion with the music to become a text with its own claims on our attention. At least in Porter’s case, however, the lyrics retain their malleability; singers can and do make of them what they will.

11 See Anahid Kassabian, Elena Boschi, and Marta Garcia Quiñones, eds., *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds that We Don’t Always Notice* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), and Paul Allen Anderson, “Neo-Muzak and the Business of Mood,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2015): 811–40.

12 See Rick Altman, “Early Film Themes: Roxy, Adorno, and Cultural Capital,” in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Richard Leppert, and Lawrence Kramer (Berkeley and London: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 205–224. Until late in the twentieth century, vocal music was understood to resist the semiotic reduction that would migrate in cinema from live music to underscore. But song has long since proven just as vulnerable as instrumental music, as the now common use of vocal underscore attests.

13 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 72.

14 Available online at <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/charge-light-brigade> and <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/robert-browning-attempting-to-recite-a-poem-on-the-edison-cylinder-1889/>. The Tennyson recording was made on May 15th, 1890, the Browning on April 7th, 1889. I suppose that Browning’s memory lapse may have been real, but his amused statement, “I’m terribly sorry but I can’t remember me own verses,” followed by the remark that he will certainly not forget Edison’s “wonderful invention,” certainly has stage presence. Whatever the situation, he made the most of it.

15 For a new consideration of the relation of the Caruso recordings and modernity, see chapter 3 of Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity, Subjectivity, and Nature: Opera-Orchestra-Phonograph-Film* (Berkeley and London: Univ. of California Press, 2015).

16 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976).

17 Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 307–30.

18 Available online at <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/tw.asp?w=W2072>.

19 Daniel Tiffany, "Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 72–99.

20 The piano postlude anticipates its default on the major by reaching the song's pitch ceiling on high C (C6) followed two measures later by a drop to the C an octave lower. The note feels vulnerable because its registral position is the one held by the long preceding series of C-flats, which then resumes immediately in the same place at the start of the next measure. On songfulness, see the eponymous chapter in my *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 51–67.