

be exclusively a studio, a workshop, an atelier from **which** nothing—no dream, no image-repertoire, in a word no "soul"—will overflow and where all musical *doing* will be absorbed **into** a *praxis* with nothing *left over*. It is this utopia which a **certain** Beethoven, one not played, teaches us to formulate—whereby it is possible to foresee in him a musician still to come.

1970

## *The Grain of the Voice*

Language, according to Benveniste, is the only semiotic system capable of *interpreting* another semiotic system (though there are doubtless certain limit-works, in which a system feigns self-interpretation: *The Art of the Fugue*). How then does language manage, when it must interpret music? Alas, badly—very badly, it seems. If we examine the current practice of music criticism (or of conversations "on" music: often the same thing), we see that the work (or its performance) is invariably translated into the poorest linguistic category: the adjective. Music is, by a natural inclination, what immediately receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, that execution is *that*. No doubt, once we make an art into a subject (of an article, a conversation), there is nothing left for us to do but "predicate" it; but in the case of music, this predication inevitably takes the most facile and trivial form: the epithet. Of course this epithet, to which we turn and return out of weakness or fascination (parlor game: discuss a piece of music without using a single adjective), has an

economic function: the predicate is always the rampart by which the subject's image-repertoire protects itself against the loss that threatens it: the man who furnishes himself or is furnished with an adjective is sometimes wounded, sometimes pleased, but always *constituted*; music has an image-repertoire whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject, who hears it (would this be because music is dangerous—an old Platonic notion? Leading to ecstasy, to loss, as many examples from ethnography and popular culture would tend to show?), and this image-repertoire immediately comes to language by the adjective. A historical dossier should be compiled here, for adjectival criticism (or predicative interpretation) has assumed, down through the ages, certain institutional aspects: the musical adjective becomes somehow legal whenever an *ethos* of music is postulated, i.e., whenever a regular (natural or magical) mode of signification is attributed to music: among the ancient Greeks, for whom it was the musical *language* (and not the contingent work), in its denotative structure, which was immediately adjectival, each mode being linked to a coded expression (harsh, austere, proud, virile, solemn, majestic, warlike, educative, proud, ceremonious, mourning, proper, dissolute, voluptuous); and among the Romantics, from Schumann to Debussy, who substitute or add to the simple indication of movements (*allegro, presto, andante*) certain poetic, emotive, increasingly refined predicates—given in the vernacular, so as to diminish the coded imprint and to develop the "free" character of the predication (*sehr kräftig, sehr präzis, spirituel et discret*, etc.).

Are we doomed to the adjective? Are we faced with this dilemma: the predicable or the ineffable? To know whether there are (verbal) means of talking about music without adjectives, we would have to consider a little more closely all of music criticism, which, I believe, has never been done and which, even so, we have neither the intention nor the means

of doing here. What we can say is this: it is not by struggling against the adjective (shifting this adjective that comes to the tip of our tongue toward some substantive or verbal periphrasis) that we are likely to exorcise musical commentary and to liberate it from the predicative fatality; rather than trying to change directly the language used about music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to speech: to modify its level of perception or of intellection: to shift the fringe of contact between music and language.

It is this shift that I should like to sketch here, not with regard to all music, but only with regard to a portion of vocal music (art song, lied, or *mélodie*); a very specific space (genre) in which *a language encounters a yoke*. I shall immediately give a name to this signifier on the level of which, I believe, the temptation of *ethos* can be liquidated—and the adjective therefore dismissed: this name will be the *grain*: the grain of the voice, when the voice is in a double posture, a double production: of language and of music.

What I shall attempt to say about the "*grain*" will, of course, be only an apparently abstract approach, the impossible accounting of an individual enjoyment which I constantly experience when I listen to singing. In order to disengage this "*grain*" from the acknowledged values of vocal music, I shall employ a double opposition: the theoretical one of the pheno-text and the geno-text (Kristeva's terms), and the paradigmatic one of two singers, one of whom I like very much (though he is no longer to be heard) and the other very little (though he is heard more than anyone else): Panzéra and Fischer-Dieskau (who will, of course, be no more than ciphers here: I am not deifying the first and I have nothing against the second).

Listen to a Russian bass (a church bass: for opera, the entire voice shifts to dramatic expressivity: a voice in which the grain signifies little): something is there, manifest and persistent

(you hear only *that*), which is past (or previous to) the meaning of the words, of their form (the litany), of the melisma and even of the style of performance: something which is directly the singer's body, brought by one and the same movement to your ear from the depths of the body's cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilage, and from the depths of the Slavonic language, as if a single skin lined the performer's inner flesh and the music he sings. This voice is not personal: it expresses nothing about the singer, about his soul; it is not original (all Russian basses have this same voice, more or less), and at the same time it is individual: it enables us to hear a body which, of course, has no public identity, no "personality," but which is nonetheless a separate body; and above all this voice directly conveys the symbolic, over and above the intelligible, the expressive: here, flung before us all in a heap, is the Father, his phallic status. That is what the "grain" would be: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue: perhaps the letter; almost certainly what I have called *signifying* [*signifiance*].

It is here in song, then (pending the extension of the distinction to all music), that we first discern the two texts of which Julia Kristeva writes. The *pheno-song* (if I may be permitted to make this transposition) covers all the phenomena, all the features which derive from the structure of the sung language, from the coded form of the melisma, the idiolect, the composer, the style of interpretation: in short, everything which, in the performance, is at the service of communication, of representation, of expression: what is usually spoken of, what forms the tissue of cultural values (the substance of acknowledged tastes, of fashions, of critical discourse), what is directly articulated around the ideological alibis of a period (an artist's "subjectivity," "expressivity," "dramaticism," "personality"). The *geno-song* is the volume of the speaking and singing voice, the space in which the significations germinate "from within the language and in its very materiality"; this is a signifying func-

tion alien to communication, to representation (of feelings), to expression; it is that culmination (or depth) of production where melody actually *works on* language—not what it says but the voluptuous pleasure of its signifier-sounds, of its letters: explores how language works and identifies itself with that labor. Geno-song is, in a very simple word which must be taken quite seriously: the *diction* of language.

From the point of view of pheno-song, Fischer-Dieskau is certainly an irreproachable artist; everything in the (semantic and lyric) structure is respected; and yet nothing seduces, nothing persuades us to enjoyment; this is an excessively expressive art (the diction is dramatic, the caesuras, the checks and releases of breath intervene as in the upheavals of passion) and thereby it never transcends culture: here it is the soul that accompanies the song, not the body: for the body to accompany the musical diction, not by an impulse of emotion but by a "gesture-notice"\*—that is what is difficult, especially since all musical pedagogy teaches not the culture of the "grain" of the voice but the emotive modes of its emission: this is the myth of *breath*. How many singing teachers have we heard prophesy that the whole art of song was in the mastery, the proper management of breathing! Now, the breath is the *pneuma*, the soul swelling or breaking, and any exclusive art of the breath is likely to be a secretly mystical art (a mysticism reduced to the demands of the long-playing record). The lung, a stupid organ (the lights of catfood!), swells but does not become erect: it is in the throat, site where the phonic metal hardens and assumes its contour, it is in the facial mask that *signifying* breaks out, producing not the soul but enjoyment. In Fischer-Dieskau's performance, I seem to hear only the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the sinuses, the nose. Panzera's entire art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows (a simple

\* "This is why the best way to read me is to accompany the reading with certain appropriate body movements. *Contra* non-spoken writing, *contm* non-written speech. Pro gesture-notice" (Philippe Sollers, Lois).

technical feature: we did not hear him *breathe*, but only *shape* the phrase). An extreme thought controlled the prosody of enunciation and the phonic economy of the French language; certain prejudices (generally resulting from oratorical and ecclesiastical diction) were reversed. The consonants, which are too readily assumed to constitute the armature of our language (though it is not a Semitic language) and which we are always supposed to "articulate," to separate, to emphasize *in order to fulfill the clarity of meaning*—these consonants Panzéra frequently recommended *skating over*, restoring to them the erosion of a language which has lived, functioned, and worked for a very long time, to make it into the simple springboard of the admirable vowels: here was the "truth" of language, not its functionality (clarity, expressivity, communication); and the range of the vowels received what was *signifying* (which is everything that can be voluptuous in meaning): the opposition of *e* and *é* (so necessary in conjugation); the virtually *electric* purity, I should say, so taut, raised, exposed, tenuous was its sound, of the most French vowel of all, the *ii*, which our language does not inherit from Latin; in the same way, Panzera held his *r*'s beyond the singer's norms—without rejecting those norms: his *r* was certainly rolled, as in any classical art of song, but such rolling had nothing peasant-like or Canadian in it; it was an artificial roll, the paradoxical state of a letter sound at once quite abstract (by its metallic brevity of the vibration) and quite material (by its obvious implantation in the moving throat). Such phonetics (Am I alone in hearing it? Am I hearing voices in the voice? But is it not the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? Is not the entire space of the voice an infinite space? No doubt this was the meaning of Saussure's work on anagrams)—such phonetics does not exhaust *signifying* (which is inexhaustible); at least it imposes a limit on those efforts of *expressive reduction* made by a whole culture upon the poem and its melody.

It should not be excessively difficult to date, to specify this

culture historically. Fischer-Dieskau reigns today almost exclusively over the long-playing song discography; he has recorded everything: if you like Schubert and you don't like Fischer-Dieskau, Schubert is inaccessible to you nowadays: an example of that *positive* censorship (by repletion) which characterizes mass culture without its ever being criticized for it; perhaps this is because Fischer-Dieskau's art, expressive, dramatic, *emotionally clear*, conveyed by a voice without "grain," without signifying weight, corresponds perfectly to the requirements of an *average* culture; this culture, defined by the extension of listening and the disappearance of practice (no more amateur performers), is eager for art, for music, provided that such art and such music be clear, that they "translate" an emotion and represent a signified (the poem's "meaning"): an art which vaccinates enjoyment (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion) and reconciles the subject with what, in music, *can be said*: with what is said of it, predicatively, by the Academy, by Criticism, by Opinion. Panzera does not belong to this culture (he could not have done so, having sung before the advent of the long-playing record; I doubt, moreover, that his art, if he were singing nowadays, would be acknowledged or even simply *perceived*); his reign—very widespread between the wars—was that of an exclusively bourgeois art (i.e., in no way petit-bourgeois), concluding the fulfillment of its internal development, separated from History—by a very familiar distortion; and it is perhaps, precisely and less paradoxically than it would seem, because this art was *already* marginal, mandarin, that it could show traces of *signifying* [*signifiante*], could escape the tyranny of signification.

The "grain" of the voice is not—or not only—its timbre; the *signifying* it affords cannot be better defined than by the *friction* between music and something else, which is the language (and not the message at all). The song must speak, or better still, must *write*, for what is produced on the level of geno-song

is ultimately writing. This sung writing of the language is, to my sense, what the French *mélodie* has occasionally attempted to achieve. I know of course that the German lied, too, has been intimately linked with the German language by the intermediary of the romantic poem; I know that Schumann's poetic culture was vast and that this same Schumann once said of Schubert that if he had lived to be old he would have set all of German literature to music; but all the same I think that the historical meaning of the lied must be sought in its music (if only by reason of its folk origins). On the contrary, the historical meaning of the French *melodie* is a certain culture of the French language. We know that the romantic poetry of our country is more oratorical than textual; but what our poetry has not been able to do in and of itself, the *melodie* has sometimes accomplished in collaboration with it; it has worked on the language through the poem. This work (in the specificity here granted to it) is not apparent in the general run of melodic production, overindulgent as it is of minor poets, of the model of the petit-bourgeois ballad, of salon practice; but it is incontrovertible in several works: anthologically (let us say: virtually at random) in certain *melodies* by Faure and Duparc, massively in the late (prosodic) Faure and in Debussy's vocal oeuvre (even if *Pelleas* is often sung badly: dramatically). What is involved in these works is much more than a musical style, it is a practical reflection (so to speak) on the language; there is a gradual assumption of the language to the poem, of the poem to the *melodie*, and of the *melodie* to its performance. This means that the French *melodie* derives very little from the history of music and a great deal from the theory of the text. The signifier must, here again, be redistributed.

Let us compare two sung deaths—both very famous—that of Boris, that of Mélisande. Whatever Musorgsky's intentions, Boris's death is *expressive*, or one might even say, hysterical; it is overloaded with affective, historical content; every perform-

ance of this death has to be dramatic: this is the triumph of the pheno-text, the smothering of *signifying* under the signified: soul. Mélisande, on the contrary, dies only *prosodically*; two extremes are linked, braided: the perfect intelligibility of the denotation, and the pure prosodic contour of the enunciation: between the two a beneficent void, which constituted the repletion of Boris: *pathos*, i.e., according to Aristotle (why not?), passion *as men speak it, imagine it*, the accepted notion of death, *endoxal* death. Mélisande dies *without any noise*; let us understand this expression in its cybernetic sense: nothing comes to disturb the signifier, and hence nothing compels redundancy; there is production of a music-language whose function is to prevent the singer from being expressive. As for the Russian bass, what is symbolic (death) is immediately cast (without mediation) before us (this in order to forestall the accepted notion according to which what is not expressive has to be cold, intellectual; Melisande's death is "moving"; this means that it moves something in the chain of the signifier).

The French *mélodie* has disappeared (one might even say that it sank like a stone) for a good many reasons, or at least this disappearance has assumed a good many aspects; it doubtless succumbed under the image of its salon origin, which is somewhat the parody of its class origin; classical music of mass culture (radio, records) has left it behind, preferring either the more emotive orchestra (Mahler's triumph) or instruments less bourgeois than the piano (harpsichord, trumpet). But, above all, this death accompanies a much greater historical phenomenon, one which has little connection with the history of music or with that of musical taste: the French are abandoning their language, not of course as a normative set of noble values (clarity, elegance, correctness)—or at least we scarcely concern ourselves much about that, for those are institutional values—but as a space of pleasure, of enjoyment, a site where the language works upon *itself for nothing*, i.e., in perversion

(let us recall here the singularity—the solitude—of Philippe Sollers's recent text *Lois*, which re-presents the prosodic and metrical work of the language).

The "grain" is the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing limb. If I perceive the "grain" of this music and if I attribute to this "grain" a theoretical value (this is the assumption of the text in the work), I cannot help making a new scheme of evaluation for myself, individual no doubt, since I am determined to listen to my relation to the body of someone who is singing or playing and since that relation is an erotic one, but not at all "subjective" (it is not the psychological "subject" in me who listens; the enjoyment that subject seeks is not going to reinforce him—to express him—but on the contrary will destroy him). This evaluation will be made outside of the law: it will baffle the law of culture but also the law of anti-culture; it will develop beyond the subject all the value which is hidden behind "*I like*" or "*I don't like*." Singers, particularly, will be ranked in two categories which we might call prostitutive, since it is a matter of my choosing what does not choose me: hence, I shall freely exalt some little-known, secondary, forgotten, even dead artist, and I shall turn away from some consecrated star (let us not furnish examples, they would doubtless have only a biographical value), and I shall shift my choice to every genre of vocal music, including popular music, where I shall have no difficulty recognizing the distinction between pheno-song and geno-song (certain artists in this genre have a "grain" which others, however celebrated, do not). Further, aside from the voice, in instrumental music, the "grain" or its lack persists; for if there is no longer a language here to afford *signifying* in its extreme form and scope, there is at least the artist's body which once again compels me to an evaluation: I will not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation, the constraints of style (which are

quite illusory, moreover), almost all of which belong to the pheno-song (I shall not go into ecstasy over the "rigor," the "brilliance," the "warmth," the "respect for the score," etc.), but according to the image of the body (the figure) which is given me: I hear without a doubt—the certitude here of the body, of the body's enjoyment—that Wanda Landowska's harpsichord comes from her inner body, and not from the minor digital knitting of so many harpsichordists (to the point where I hear a different instrument); and with regard to piano music, I know immediately which part of the body it is that plays: if it is the arms, as all too often it is, muscular as a dancer's calf, or the talons (regardless of the wrist flourishes), or if on the contrary it is the only erotic part of a pianist's body: the pads of the fingers, whose "grain" I hear so rarely (need I remark that there seems to be, nowadays, under the pressure of long-playing records and their mass sales, a flattening out of technique, which is paradoxical: all playing is flattened out *into perfection*: there is nothing left but pheno-text).

All of this has been said about "classical" music (in the broadest possible sense); but it goes without saying that the mere consideration of the musical "grain" could lead to another history of music than the one we know (which is purely pheno-textual): if we were to succeed in refining a certain "aesthetic" of musical enjoyment, we should doubtless attach less importance to the tremendous break in tonality which modernity had produced.