

responsibility in his own person for what he is never alone in writing. As in the modern text, the stressing of codes, references, discontinuous observations, anthological gestures, multiplies the written line, and this not by virtue of some metaphysical appeal but by the play of a combinatory set which opens in the entire space of the theatre: what is started by the one is continued by the other, unendingly.

1968

The Grain of the Voice

Language, according to Benveniste, is the only semiotic system capable of *interpreting* another semiotic system (though undoubtedly there exist limit works in the course of which a system feigns self-interpretation – *The Art of the Fugue*). How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas, it seems, very badly. If one looks at the normal practice of music criticism (or, which is often the same thing, of conversations ‘on’ music), it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. Music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, this execution is *that*. No doubt the moment we turn an art into a subject (for an article, for a conversation) there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form, that of the epithet. Naturally, this epithet, to which we are constantly led by weakness or fascination (little parlour game: talk about a piece of music without using a single adjective), has an economic function: the predicate is always the bulwark with which the subject’s imaginary protects itself from the loss which threatens it. The man who provides himself or is provided with an adjective is now hurt, now pleased, but always *constituted*. There is an imaginary in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it (would it be that music is dangerous – the old Platonic idea? that music is an access to *jouissance*, to loss, as numerous ethnographic and popular examples would tend to show?) and this

imaginary immediately comes to language via the adjective. A historical dossier ought to be assembled here, for adjectival criticism (or predicative interpretation) has taken on over the centuries certain institutional aspects. The musical adjective becomes legal whenever an *ethos* of music is postulated, each time, that is, that music is attributed a regular – natural or magical – mode of signification. Thus with 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 (rude, austere, proud, virile, solemn, majestic, warlike, educative, noble, sumptuous, doleful, modest, dissolute, voluptuous); thus with the Romantics, from Schumann to Debussy, who substitute for, or add to, the simple indication of tempo (*allegro*, *presto*, *andante*) poetic, emotive predicates which are increasingly refined and which are given in the national language so as to diminish the mark of the code and develop the ‘free’ character of the predication (*sehr kräftig*, *sehr präcis*, *spirituel et discret*, etc.).

Are we condemned to the adjective? Are we reduced to the dilemma of either the predicable or the ineffable? To ascertain whether there are (verbal) means for talking about music without adjectives, it would be necessary to look at more or less the whole of music criticism, something which I believe has never been done and which, nevertheless, I have neither the intention nor the means of doing here. This much, however, can be said: it is not by struggling against the adjective (diverting the adjective you find on the tip of the tongue towards some substantive or verbal periphrasis) that one stands a chance of exorcising music commentary and liberating it from the fatality of predication; rather than trying to change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its

level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language.

It is this displacement that I want to outline, not with regard to the whole of music but simply to a part of vocal music (*lied* or *mélodie*): the very precise space (genre) of *the encounter between a language and a voice*. I shall straightaway give a name to this signifier at the level of which, I believe, the temptation of *ethos* can be liquidated (and thus the adjective banished): the *grain*, the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music.

What I shall attempt to say of the ‘grain’ will, of course, be only the apparently abstract side, the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing. In order to disengage this ‘grain’ from the acknowledged values of vocal music, I shall use a twofold opposition: theoretical, between the pheno-text and the geno-text (borrowing from Julia Kristeva), and paradigmatic, between two singers, one of whom I like very much (although he is no longer heard), the other very little (although one hears no one but him), Panzera and Fischer-Dieskau (here merely ciphers: I am not deifying the first or attacking the second).

Listen to a Russian bass (a church bass – opera is a genre in which the voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity, a voice with a grain which little signifies): something is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only *that*), beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form (the litany), the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the

music he sings. The voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original (all Russian cantors have roughly the same voice), and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no 'personality', but which is nevertheless a separate body. Above all, this voice bears along *directly* the symbolic, over the intelligible, the expressive: here, thrown in front of us like a packet, is the Father, his phallic stature. The 'grain' is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *signifiante*.

Thus we can see in song (pending the extension of this distinction to the whole of music) the two texts described by Julia Kristeva. The *pheno-song* (if the transposition be allowed) covers all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer's idiolect, the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values (the matter of acknowledged tastes, of fashions, of critical commentaries), which takes its bearing directly on the ideological alibis of a period ('subjectivity', 'expressivity', 'dramaticism', 'personality' of the artist). The *geno-song* is the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality'; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. It is, in a very simple word but which must be taken seriously, the

diction of the language.

From the point of view of the pheno-song, Fischer-Dieskau is assuredly an artist beyond reproach: everything in the (semantic and lyrical) structure is respected and yet nothing seduces, nothing sways us to *jouissance*. His art is inordinately expressive (the diction is dramatic, the pauses, the checkings and releasings of breath, occur like shudders of passion) and hence never exceeds culture: here it is the soul which accompanies the song, not the body. What is difficult is for the body to accompany the musical diction not with a movement of emotion but with a 'gesture-support';¹ all the more so since the whole of musical pedagogy teaches not the culture of the 'grain' of the voice but the emotive modes of its delivery – the myth of respiration. How many singing teachers have we not heard prophesying that the art of vocal music rested entirely on the mastery, the correct discipline of breathing! The breath is the *pneuma*, the soul swelling or breaking, and any exclusive art of breathing is likely to be a secretly mystical art (a mysticism levelled down to the measure of the long-playing record). The lung, a stupid organ (lights for cats!), swells but gets no erection; it is in the throat, place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that *signifiante* explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*. With FD, I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose. All of Panzera's art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows (simple technical feature: you never heard him *breathe* but only divide up the phrase). An extreme rigour of thought regulated the prosody of the enunciation and the phonic economy of the French language; prejudices

1. 'Which is why the best way to read me is to accompany the reading with certain appropriate bodily movements. Against non-spoken writing, against non-written speech. For the gesture-support.' Philippe Sollers, *Lois*, Paris 1972, p. 108.

(generally stemming from oratorical and ecclesiastical diction) were overthrown. With regard to the consonants, too readily thought to constitute the very armature of our language (which is not, however, a Semitic one) and always prescribed as needing to be ‘articulated’, detached, emphasized *in order to fulfil the clarity of meaning*, Panzera recommended that in many cases they be *patinated*, given the wear of a language that had been living, functioning, and working for ages past, that they be made simply the springboard for the admirable vowels. There lay the ‘truth’ of language – not its functionality (clarity, expressivity, communication) – and the range of vowels received all the *signifiante* (which is meaning in its potential voluptuousness): the opposition of *é* and *è* (so necessary in conjugation), the purity – almost *electronic*, so much was its sound tightened, raised, exposed, held – of the most French of vowels, the *ü* (a vowel not derived by French from Latin). Similarly, Panzera carried his *r*’s beyond the norms of the singer – without denying those norms. His *r* was of course rolled, as in every classic art of singing, but the roll had nothing peasant-like or Canadian about it; it was an artificial roll, the paradoxical state of a letter-sound at once totally abstract (by its metallic brevity of vibration) and totally material (by its manifest deep-rootedness in the action of the throat). This phonetics – am I alone in perceiving it? am I hearing voices within the voice? but isn’t it the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? isn’t the entire space of the voice an infinite one? which was doubtless the meaning of Saussure’s work on anagrams – does not exhaust *signifiante* (which is inexhaustible) but it does at least hold in check the attempts at *expressive reduction* operated by a whole culture against the poem and its melody.

It would not be too difficult to date that culture, to define it historically. FD now reigns more or less unchallenged over the recording of vocal music; he has recorded every-

thing. If you like Schubert but not FD, then Schubert is today *forbidden* you – an example of that positive censorship (censorship by repletion) which characterizes mass culture though it is never criticized. His art – expressive, dramatic, *sentimentally clear*, borne by a voice lacking in any ‘grain’, in signifying weight, fits well with the demands of an *average* culture. Such a culture, defined by the growth of the number of listeners and the disappearance of practitioners (no more amateurs), wants art, wants music, provided they be clear, that they ‘translate’ an emotion and represent a signified (the ‘meaning’ of a poem); an art that inoculates pleasure (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion) and reconciles the subject to what in music *can be said*: what is said about it, predicatively, by Institution, Criticism, Opinion. Panzera does not belong to this culture (he could not have done, having sung before the coming of the microgroove record; moreover I doubt whether, were he singing today, his art would be recognized or even simply *perceived*); his reign, very great between the wars, was that of an exclusively bourgeois art (an art, that is, in no way *petit-bourgeois*) nearing the end of its inner development and, by a familiar distortion, separated from History. It is perhaps, precisely and less paradoxically than it seems, because this art was *already* marginal, *mandarin*, that it was able to bear traces of *signifiante*, to escape the tyranny of meaning.

The ‘grain’ of the voice is not – or is not merely – its timbre; the *signifiante* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message). The song must speak, must *write* – for what is produced at the level of the *genosong* is finally writing. This sung writing of language is, as I see it, what the French *mélodie* sometimes tried to

accomplish. I am well aware that the German *lied* was intimately bound up with the German language via the Romantic poem, that the poetical culture of Schumann was immense and that this same Schumann used to say of Schubert that had he lived into old age he would have set the whole of German literature to music, but I think nevertheless that the historical meaning of the *lied* must be sought in the music (if only because of its popular origins). By contrast, the historical meaning of the *mélodie* is a certain culture of the French language. As we know, the Romantic poetry of France is more oratorical than textual; what the poetry could not accomplish on its own, however, the *mélodie* has occasionally accomplished with it, working at the language through the poem. Such a work (in the specificity here acknowledged it) is not to be seen in the general run of the *mélodies* produced which are too accommodating towards minor poets, the model of the petit-bourgeois romance, and salon usages, but in some few pieces it is indisputable – anthologically (a little by chance) in certain songs by Fauré and Duparc, massively in the later (prosodic) Fauré and the vocal work of Debussy (even if *Pelléas* is often sung badly – dramatically). What is engaged in these works is, much more than a musical style, a practical reflection (if one may put it like that) on the language; there is a progressive movement from the language to the poem, from the poem to the song and from the song to its performance. Which means that the *mélodie* has little to do with the history of music and much with the theory of the text. Here again, the signifier must be redistributed.

Compare two sung deaths, both of them famous: that of Boris and that of Mélisande. Whatever Mussorgsky's intentions, the death of Boris is *expressive* or, if preferred, *hysterical*; it is overloaded with historical, affective contents. Performances of the death cannot be but dramatic: it is the triumph of the pheno-text, the smothering of *signifiance*

under the soul as signified. Mélisande, on the contrary, only dies *prosodically*. Two extremes are joined, woven together: the perfect intelligibility of the denotation and the pure prosodic segmentation of the enunciation; between the two a salutary gap (filled out in Boris) – the *pathos*, that is to say, according to Aristotle (why not?), passion *such as men speak and imagine it*, the accepted idea of death, *endoxical* death. Mélisande dies *without any noise* (understanding the term in its cybernetic sense): nothing occurs to interfere with the signifier and there is thus no compulsion to redundancy; simply, the production of a music-language with the function of preventing the singer from being expressive. As with the Russian bass, the symbolic (the death) is thrown immediately (without mediation) before us (this to forestall the stock idea which has it that what is not expressive can only be cold and intellectual; Mélisande's death is 'moving', which means that it shifts something in the chain of the signifier).

The *mélodie* disappeared – sank to the bottom – for a good many reasons, or at least the disappearance took on a good many aspects. Doubtless it succumbed to its salon image, this being a little the ridiculous form of its class origin. Mass 'good' music (records, radio) has left it behind, preferring either the more pathetic orchestra (success of Mahler) or less bourgeois instruments than the piano (harpsichord, trumpet). Above all, however, the death of the *mélodie* goes along with a much wider historical phenomenon to a large extent unconnected to the history of music or of musical taste: the French are abandoning their language, not, assuredly, as a normative set of noble values (clarity, elegance, correctness) – or at least this does not bother me very much for these are institutional values – but as a space of pleasure, of thrill, a site where language works *for nothing*, that is, in perversion (remember here the singularity – the solitude – of *Lois* by Philippe Sollers,

theatre of the return of the prosodic and metrical work of the language).

The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive the ‘grain’ in a piece of music and accord this ‘grain’ a theoretical value (the emergence of the text in the work), I inevitably set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual – I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic – but in no way ‘subjective’ (it is not the psychological ‘subject’ in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce – to express – that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it). The evaluation will be made outside of any law, outplaying not only the law of culture but equally that of anticulture, developing beyond the subject all the value hidden behind ‘I like’ or ‘I don’t like’. Singers especially will be ranged in what may be called, since it is a matter of my choosing without there being any reciprocal choice of me, two prostitional categories. Thus I shall freely extol such and such a performer, little-known, minor, forgotten, dead perhaps, and turn away from such another, an acknowledged star (let us refrain from examples, no doubt of merely biographical significance); I shall extend my choice across all the genres of vocal music including popular music, where I shall have no difficulty in rediscovering the distinction between the pheno-song and the geno-song (some popular singers have a ‘grain’ while others, however famous, do not). What is more, leaving aside the voice, the ‘grain’ – or the lack of it – persists in instrumental music; if the latter no longer has language to lay open *significance* in all its volume, at least there is the performer’s body which again forces me to evaluation. I shall not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation, the constraints of style (any-

way highly illusory), which almost all belong to the pheno-song (I shall not wax lyrical concerning the ‘rigour’, the ‘brilliance’, the ‘warmth’, the ‘respect for what is written’, etc.), but according to the image of the body (the figure) given me. I can hear with certainty – the certainty of the body, of thrill – that the harpsichord playing of Wanda Landowska comes from her inner body and not from the petty digital scramble of so many harpsichordists (so much so that it is a different instrument). As for piano music, I know at once which part of the body is playing – if it is the arm, too often, alas, muscled like a dancer’s calves, the clutch of the finger-tips (despite the sweeping flourishes of the wrists), or if on the contrary it is the only erotic part of a pianist’s body, the pad of the fingers whose ‘grain’ is so rarely heard (it is hardly necessary to recall that today, under the pressure of the mass long-playing record, there seems to be a flattening out of technique; which is paradoxical in that the various manners of playing are all flattened out *into perfection*: nothing is left but pheno-text).

This discussion has been limited to ‘classical music’. It goes without saying, however, that the simple consideration of ‘grain’ in music could lead to a different history of music from the one we know now (which is purely pheno-textual). Were we to succeed in refining a certain ‘aesthetics’ of musical pleasure, then doubtless we would attach less importance to the formidable break in tonality accomplished by modernity.