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An Alternative Voice

Istvan Anhalt, *Alternative Voices* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), £29.75; distributed in the UK by I.D.B. Ltd, 66 Wood Lane End, Hemel Hempstead

Of all the people who plan structures in the domain of vocal sound, or who cause such events to occur, only a few normally call themselves composers. The others profess to be working as vocal performers, playwrights, actors, stage-directors, poets, media sound-effects persons, clergymen, linguists, lawyers, Inuit shamans, sound-engineers, psychologists, announcers, advertising specialists, auctioneers and so on. (p.151)

This would seem an appropriate quotation with which to introduce one of the most informative and seminal books on music I have read for many years. Istvan Anhalt's *Alternative Voices*, the result of ten years of continuous research into vocal music, sets out to place contemporary developments in the musical use of the voice in the much broader historical and cultural context of human utterance in general.

For those nurtured on a score-based analytic approach to musical structure this may initially smack of sociological generalism. Far from it, however.

The art of a Chaliapin, or a Guilbert, or, for that matter, a Janis Joplin, makes it clear that to penetrate beyond an intuitive understanding towards a reasoned comprehension of a work requires knowledge about acoustics, the physiology of the voice, phonetics, and the psychology of vocal utterance. (p.158)

And Anhalt begins his work with penetrating analyses of three contemporary vocal works; Berio's *Sequenza III* (1966), Ligeti's *Nouvelles aventures* (1962-5), and Lutosławski's *Trzy poematy Henri Michaux* (1963). Of these, the Ligeti analysis is perhaps the most profound and illustrates Anhalt's approach well. Using criteria derived from research in psycholinguistics and other sciences of human communication, Anhalt is able to provide a penetrating note-by-note analysis of the human drama played out in this highly condensed work. In fact 'note-by-note' does an injustice to the method, as the pregnant silences are analysed in just as much detail as the sounds; later in the book Anhalt specifically

refers to psycholinguistic research, which has classified types of pause in human utterance in terms of their communication function, or psychological significance, which depends on the context in which they occur.

Undoubtedly this approach will not be welcomed unequivocally by all members of the music fraternity, particularly as it embraces aspects of music which are, in a certain very limited sense, 'not in the score'. I can remember, as a student composer, arguing strongly with others who, I felt, were using phonetic permutation techniques (derived from the work of Berio) as a musical procedure, while glossing over the psychological import of the dismemberment of the texts. At the time, however, my objections appeared 'subjective' and 'extra-musical', compared with the analytic concreteness of the scored procedures themselves. Anhalt's book addresses this problem in a profound and detailed manner, and in so doing offers new insights into the layers of timbral complexity and the concomitant psychological meaning involved in the use of the human voice.

One general feature of the book with which I had difficulty was, in fact, its academic thoroughness. In his desire to give a respectable grounding to an approach which is perhaps new to music analysts, Anhalt has referenced his text so well that it occasionally becomes heavy going. Similarly, in chapters such as 'Theme and Recent Background' and 'Orpheus Resurgent', the desire for a complete overview of the multiplicity of approaches to the voice adopted by modern composers occasionally tends towards list-making where, as a reader, I would have preferred a more systematic, if therefore opinionated, appraisal of notational or text-setting procedures and even ideological positions taken up by the composers discussed. Anhalt's presentation, however, makes his book an ideal reference text for further research.

At a more detailed level, I had some minor difficulties with the analytical terminology used to describe Lutosławski's *Trzy poematy*. Anhalt introduces a number of terms to describe the behaviour of layers of statistically distributed materials. However, from the descriptions in the text of 'interlock', 'sweep' and 'swarm', I would have concluded that Example 4.12 was a 'swarm' (Anhalt describes it as an 'interlock'). Similarly, if Example 4.13 is a 'sweep', why is Example 4.12 not a 'sweep'? In fact it was difficult to ascertain whether the term 'sweep' referred to a texture whose total pitch-band rose (or fell), or a texture whose constituents rose (or fell), or both. This kind of problem however merely emphasises the lack of an agreed technical vocabulary for the discussion of works the textures of which are based on 'mass-aggregates' in this way.

The discussion of Graeco-Egyptian magical incantational procedures and their relationship to phonetic text deconstructions in contemporary works was highly illuminating. I found myself, however, disagreeing with Anhalt's semi-equation of magical 'causality' and scientific causality—the one an idealist and the other a materialist conception—and wondered how the composers of such works, mostly growing out of the extreme 'rationalist' ethos of post-Webern modernism, would react to this equation. For me, Anhalt's parallelism amounts to a critique of the whole super-rationalist ethos of much avant-garde work in the sixties.

The tracing of the historical development of text-sound art, from the Dadaists and before to the Lettrist movement, adds an interesting new dimension to the perception of developments 'inside' the world of music. But, although he makes some reference to popular music ('stretching, straining—do not these

words bring to mind the high-larynxed nasal voice of the typical male rock singer?'), Anhalt in general concentrates on the musical (and text-sound) avant-garde. This is a pity, for popular vocal music, being so very much focused on the idiosyncratic practices of individual vocalists, and the adoption of various stereotypical (often class- or gender-defining) vocal mannerisms, is a rich seam for Anhalt's style of analysis.

More generally, Anhalt's analytic referent for phonetic play—play with rates of delivery, intonation, etc.—tends to be the 'normal' speech-act. Fruitful and insightful though this approach is, there are other modalities of vocal use which we need not relate to the flow of speech utterance, such as vocal mimicry (of other creatures, natural events, machines) and voice sounds as pure timbral objects having their own internal logic and sufficiently distanced from speech-acts to be disconnected from that domain in our perception. Here an approach based upon detailed acoustic analysis is required. Anhalt's book does review the research in this area quite well, but as most of this research has been initiated and developed by language specialists, the resulting discussion tends to remain within the domain of the psychology and physiology of speech-acts. An independent acoustic understanding of timbral articulation (similar to the musician's systematically abstracted approach to pitch relations) would be a powerful complement to Anhalt's book.