



The Human Voice In A New World

Various venues, New York City, USA

The Electronic Music Foundation's The Human Voice In A New World brought together vocalists and artists working with various media in an effort to explore the intersections between the limits of the human voice and those of technologies of sound.

The festival opener was the wondrous brainchild of Tmema's Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman, *Messa Di Voce*, a 45 minute piece for two singers, Joan La Barbara and Jaap Blonk, and an image/sound processing software that rendered sound and movement into images. The highly sensitive software captures and analyses the elements of the human voices and, subsequently, reimagines them as visuals on a screen. *Messa Di Voce* took the antiquated concept of madrigalism, or word painting, to its technological extreme: by blending synaesthesia and interactive communication between performers and software, and by using extremely sophisticated modules that projected cartoonish, poignant and spectacular images, *Messa* delivered an icono-choreography of immense precision.

Divided into a few standalone sketches, the composition placed the voice in an environment of childish and unrestrained euphoria. Either solo or as a duet, Blonk and La Barbara frolicked carefree on stage. They either conversed in amphibian-ese as their percussive vowels generated ripples across the screen, or Blonk intoned in some harsh, incomprehensible language while La Barbara's silhouette resembled that of a granulated Tasmanian devil, and sometimes the visual expressionism was simply overwhelming, like when percolating worms of different shapes, mimicking horsy vocals, climaxed in a panorama of interwoven lines and curves. Blonk's solo sketch was characterised by simplicity

and was marked by an existential anxiety more commonly found in silent movies. As a result of his cheek-flapping, he emitted bouncing bubbles that floated upwards on the screen and filled the space above him. Standing in the middle of all this agitation, it was as if he was participating in an underwater Arkanoid game with him quacking like a duck.

Another variation on the concept of word-painting, in a totally different vein, was Joel Chadabe's and Richard Kostelanetz's *Micro Fictions* during the second day. The author, Kostelanetz, read out seven words and the composer, Chadabe, created sonic environments that responded to them. The words freedom, self-improvement, dieting, menacing, deluge, infinity and mesmerizing were recited calmly and with a graceful pace as Chadabe's digital soundscapes ranged from torrents of pulsating electrons (for deluge) to a steady low drone (for infinity).

The next performer, Trevor Wishart, who hadn't appeared in New York for 30 years, started his set with *Vocalise*, a brief improvisational piece for amplified voice. Wishart showed that his technique was not limited to his vocal skills, but it was extended to his spasmodic expressions that contorted his face and radiated through the rest of his body.

Wishart's second and far more ambitious composition, *Globalalia*, utilised software to blend different syllable samples culled from radio and TV broadcasts from around the world. As the piece progressed, it became increasingly hard to distinguish between the different samples, and one ended up being surrounded by a raging sea of consonants and vowels. *Globalalia* alludes, of course, to glossolalia, and the question arising after the piece ended was, what happens when the world stops making sense? What is there left to say?

The answer resounded during the third and final day, which was by all accounts a curatorial success. Bora Yoon presented (*Phonation*), a multimedia composition for solo performer and real-time video manipulation. The humble and charismatic Yoon manipulated loops that were created on the spot, either by playing the violin, humming a few phrases, or by using her mobile phone as a modified keyboard instrument. She was equipped with a panoply of turntables, radio transistors and an old phonograph speaker which she used as a megaphone during a three-voice antiphonal. Her love for nuanced timbre and her careful use of the space were enchanting attributes of her airy and almost disembodied performance.

From delicate to rousing, the festival ended with a bang, as the zany and ebullient David Moss unleashed his *Voice Box Spectra* in Judson Church. Like a half-demented professor, he stood behind his portable cabinet of curiosities, which was packed with pedals, electronics, small instruments, and sundry objects, all malleable puppets in his hands.

An expert storyteller, Moss recounted various absurdist tales, slipping in and out of character to punctuate the relationship between life and art and to intensify the dichotomy, if any, between the two. His voice sounded assertive, but it also had a suaveness that is characteristic of low-register singers. His performance was a mixed bag of genre-defying vocalisations and of aphoristic gems like "stones are either in your shoes, or in the way. Or, they are the way." He has dubbed his rapid-fire verbal exercises "faster-than-logic communication", which is what he indubitably achieved just before releasing us "into the rest of the universe" and receiving a thunderous applause. Stefanos Tsigrimanis

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